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FIFTEEN RANGE ROMANCES

VOL. 2 NO. 2

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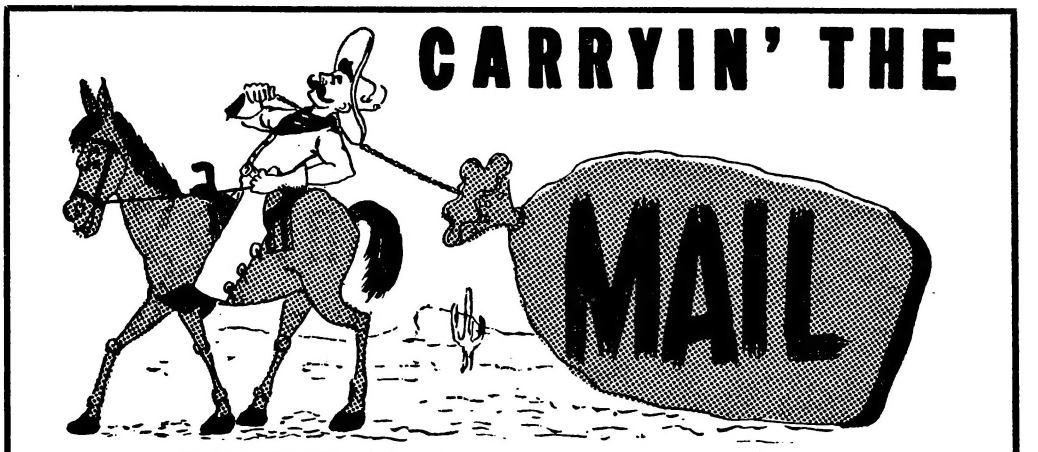

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The mail is in for this issue, so step right up to the bunkhouse and see who's honin' to write to *you!*

Any Girls for a Sailor?

Dear Editor:

Lonely sailor in Alaska wishing to correspond with all interested females. Pictures will be appreciated. I have been stationed in Alaska for eight months and haven't talked to a girl. My height is 6 feet 1 inch and I weigh 187. Have black, curly hair and smoky gray eyes.

From the Land of the Sky Blue Snow.

BILL HOLLY
Navy 125, Box 20
c/o PM
Seattle, Wash.

Lady From Canada

Dear Editor:

Could a lonesome Canadian girl get some pen pards? I am 18 years old, 5 feet 7 inches tall, have brownish auburn hair, dark blue eyes and fair skin. I like all sports, especially baseball and football. I also like to dance, and collect all kinds of records. I would specially like to hear from servicemen. I will answer all letters and exchange photos. Come on, let's have some mail.

IRENE BUCKLEY
16 Patrick St.
Kingston,
Ontario, Canada

Hollywood Ex-Sailor

Dear Editor.

Could a Hollywood ex-sailor join the Carryin' The Mail column? I am 25—6 feet 1 inch tall, weigh 160, have blond hair and blue eyes. I like all sports, music, theater, letter writing, traveling, romancing and meeting nice people—also photography. I am considered handsome. Blond. And am very affectionate. So come on, you girls, and swamp my mail box and send your snapshots. Will answer all who write.

BRUCE IMES
844 North Formosa Ave.,
Hollywood, Calif.

Give a Gal a Break!

Dear Editor:

Will you please help me get acquainted with a carload of new friends? I am a French girl and I would enjoy hearing from boys and girls who are as anxious as I am to have pen pals. I like to listen to French music and would like to hear from French-Basque boys and girls. I am 4 feet 11 inches tall, weigh 125 pounds, have brown eyes and black hair. I will exchange photos with

(Continued on page 8)

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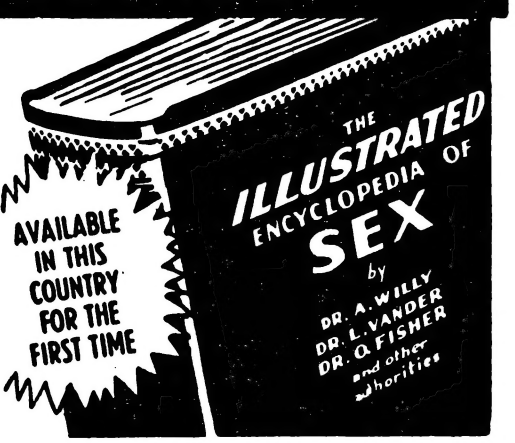

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(Continued from page 6)

anyone who wants to. I will answer every letter I get. Come on, kids, give a girl a break. I would like to hear from servicemen, especially boys from France.

ERMINIA ELIZABETH ESCALERA
P. O. Box 1013
Riverdale, Calif.

His Mail Box Is Dusty

Dear Editor:

I would deeply appreciate hearing from any girls between the ages of 17 and 20 who are seeking a true and sincere friend. I am 21 years of age, single, 6 feet 1½ inches tall, have light brown hair and blue eyes, and weigh 150 pounds. Favorite sports consist of swimming, dancing, hiking, hunting, and fishing. My only talent is art. Favorite pastime is writing long and interesting letters. I promise to answer all letters I receive and will exchange snapshots with the first six who write. So, you girls who are between the ages of 17 and 20, drop some mail in my dusty box.

A/2c ALLEN MITCHELL—19380392
P. O. Box 4674
Hq. & Hq. Squadron Section
1300th Air Base Group
Great Falls Air Force Base
Great Falls, Montana

Wants New Buddies

Dear Editor:

Please publish my plea for a sincere male buddy, as they are hard to find. I live alone and I am so lonesome for mail. I like all sports, music, movies, traveling and meeting nice people. So, come on, fellas, and drop me a few lines and send your photo. Will answer all letters.

JOE DMOWSKI
846 North Formosa Ave.
Hollywood, Calif.

Vancouver Miss

Dear Editor:

I would like it very much if you would feature my name in one of your magazines as I have no one to write to and I'm sure there are some servicemen who are in the same position and would like to correspond with me. I am sixteen years old and I can't say I'm a poor looking specimen of a female although I'm not a ravishing beauty. I'm 5 feet 7¾ inches tall, have blue-gray eyes and light brown hair. I like reading, writing, dancing, music, walking and sports of all kinds. I will answer all letters.

JOANNE ERLANDSON
231 Templeton Drive,
Vancouver 6,
B. C., Canada

He's Waiting!

Dear Editor:

I'm in the Army and don't receive much mail. I have lots of time off, being a cook, and would love to hear from girls all over the world who would be interested in writing to a serviceman.

I'm from St. Louis, Mo., and am stationed at Ft. Eustis, Va., and at present am home on leave. Before service I was an art student and photographer. I've dark brown hair and blue eyes, 149 pounds, tall and thin. Am a pipe smoker and love cigars also. I love to paint in oils, sketch, swim and sun bathe, dance, read a lot. I like tennis, golf, rifle-pistol marksmanship, travel, and I collect records.

All service women, models, singers, lovers of art, music and outdoors, and just everyone, write, won't you? I'll be waiting to hear from all of you now.

PVT. JOSEPH J. RUH, U S 55255403
Hq. and Hq. Co. 702 TRGD
Ft. Eustis, Va.

Western-Minded

Dear Editor:

How about letting a lonesome gal from Denver, Colorado, in on your Carryin' The Mail? I am 32 years old, blue eyes, brown hair, am 5 feet 5 inches tall, and weigh 170 pounds. Like Western music, polkas, and like square dancing very much. Am a steady reader of *Fifteen Range Romances*. Would like to hear from pen pals from 32 to 45.

INEZ FRITZ
1561 Osceola St.,
Denver 4, Colo.

Specially to Southerners

Dear Editor:

How about a little print space for yours truly? I'm a lonesome guy, single, 25 years old. Have brown hair, green eyes, 5 feet 8 inches tall, 158 pounds. Would like guys and gals from 16 to 25 to write to. Particularly from New Orleans and the Southern states, but will be a faithful pen pal to all who write. So if you want a real true pen pal, write to:

JERRY MOTTWEILER
35 East 11th St.,
New Albany, Ind.

Hi, There, Texans!

Dear Editor:

As this is my first try, I would like it very much if my letter appeared in *Fifteen Range Romances*. I am a 16-year-old hazel-eyed blonde, already reaching 5 feet 9 inches tall. Although I live in the big city, I like the country much better. I love all birds and animals, wild or tame. My hobbies are dancing, reading, and traveling. I like all sports, especially swimming, baseball, and horseback riding. So, come on, all young servicemen, and write to me. And let's hear from fellows and girls down Texas way.

KATHLEEN OLAFSON,
604 Toronto St.
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

More Word from Canada

Deaf Editor:

This is my first try for pen pals, so please try to get it in. Am 25 years old with brown wavy hair, brown eyes, and am 6 feet ½ inch tall. Am

(Continued on page 10)

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DRY-TABS, in most cases, does not offer merely temporary stopping of BED-WETTING. In case after case, as revealed in clinical tests conducted in hospitals by medical scientists, the DRY-TABS formula proved itself to be a tablet that gives direct support to the patient in controlling his BED-WETTING. The benefits of the DRY-TABS formula may be expected to be effective beyond the period when it is taken regularly. It helps the BED-WETTING victim to retrain, tends to increase strength of sphincter and detrusor muscles controlling urination. Many cases have discontinued the use of DRY-TABS after a short time and found they were functioning normally. So BED-WETTING victims do not have to be slaves to any kind of medication if their case is of the type that responds to the re-training power of DRY-TABS. This is probably one of the greatest advancements ever made in BED-WETTING therapy. Yes, once DRY-TABS stops BED-WETTING, its use may no longer be required, normal functioning and control may be developed almost miraculously. So don't hesitate a minute longer. Order DRY-TABS Today!

DRY-TABS Amazing Formula Effective in 75% of Cases

CASE NO. 1. Healthy, intelligent boy, 9 years old. BED-WETTING since infancy. Child could not break habit. All other medication failed. DRY-TABS formula taken for two three-week periods. Child has remained well for the past three years.

CASE NO. 2. Normal boy, history of BED-WETTING since infancy. Child had no organic defect. Various cures failed. Put on DRY-TABS formula regime. After a month, habit suddenly stopped.

CASE NO. 3. Male, aged 23 years. BED-WETTING since birth. Many forms of treatment failed. Unable to accept invitation to sleep out over-night. Recently married, and embarrassed by habit. After formula taken, wet bed the first two nights but never since that time.

CASE NO. 4. Girl, aged 6 years. Wet bed since infancy. Nervous, irritable. DRY-TABS formula administered for regular period. BED-WETTING stopped almost immediately. Slight relapse. Formula administered again. Child responded immediately once more, and history reveals no further relapse.

CASE NO. 5. Man, 42 years old, wet "heavily." Medication started. Wet during second week and continued to wet when medication was withdrawn for following week. Restarted after rest period, and after five-day treatment seemed to retain control of bladder function.

CASE NO. 6. Woman, 76 years old. DRY-TABS formula administered for 5 days. Improvement, upon withdrawal of medication, improvement remained. Continued gradual return of control. One year without formula and control is adequate.

WHY endure the needless shame, embarrassment, humiliation . . . the discomfort and distress of this unfortunate habit? Why put up with the daily nuisance of changing and washing bed linen and clothes? Why suffer the mortification of foul smelling bedrooms . . . the expense of ruined furniture . . . the danger of catching cold and infectious rashes?

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But now the disgrace and danger of BED-WETTING can very easily be a thing of the past with amazing new DRY-TABS. At last, medical science has discovered a safe, new, easy way to stop BED-WETTING without electrical devices . . . without rubber sheets, alarms or special diets and without interrupting needed sleep. DRY-TABS, in easy-to-take tablet form, does away with BED-WETTING as painlessly, easily and simply as swallowing an aspirin. Yes, almost miraculously, amazing, safe DRY-TABS, used as directed, help stop functional BED-WETTING . . . relieve tension and strain, often the underlying cause in most cases of this unfortunate habit. Now, for the first time, safe DRY-TABS can be obtained without prescription.

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Scientific tests actually prove DRY-TABS to be 75% effective in stopping this unfortunate habit—even after years of torment! Ends the constant worry of overnight hotel stops and fear of public embarrassment while napping on trains and buses. Don't wait another day. If your loved ones suffer the humiliation, the disgrace, insecurity and helplessness only BED-WETTING can cause, order DRY-TABS NOW! Easy to take, can be dissolved in water if necessary. Just follow simple directions.

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Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

(Printed in the United States of America)

(Continued from page 8)

a dance instructor and also like all sports. Can speak four languages, three of which are European. About five years ago I came to Canada from Estonia.

Come on, all you guys and gals from 16 to 40, and give this young fellow a try.

"ALEX"
c/o Kathleen Olafson,
604 Toronto St.
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Blue-Eyed Barbara

Dear Editor:

I would sure like to get letters from boys and girls all over the world. Am 17 years old, have blond hair and blue eyes. Am 5 feet 2 inches tall and weigh 128 pounds. I like swimming, skating, and writing letters.

Will swap snapshots with anyone.

Want pals from 17 to 20.

BARBARA J. LYBARGER
Box 74
Triplett, Mo.

Calling All Pals!

Dear Editor:

Would like to hear from gals and guys from the Canadian border to Mexico and in foreign countries too. Am a farm hand, 36 years old, brown hair, 5 feet 4, 130 pounds. Love to fish and like to write letters. Like Western shows and songs. So, come on, all you pen pals, and write.

GEORGE CARSON, JR.
Rt. 2, Box 549 A C
Klamath Falls,
Oregon

Attention, Servicemen!

Dear Editor:

I am sixteen years old, and I know how it feels not to get any mail. Am 5 feet 4 inches, light brown hair, green eyes. I like almost all sports, dancing, Western music, walking and writing letters. My hobby is collecting records and pictures. My chief interest in life is to travel. I would like to hear from any lonesome soldiers, marines, air force men, and sailors.

Will answer all letters.

ANNETTE DORISH
1602 E 6th Ave.,
Vancouver 12, B. C., Canada.

Brown-Haired Doris

Dear Editor:

Hey! Save a space for a lonesome gal in your Carryin' The Mail department. I'm seventeen and will soon be eighteen. Am five feet six inches tall.

Have brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are square dancing, photography, sewing, swimming, and most of all, writing to pen pals. Farm life gets pretty dull at times, so come on, you guys and gals between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one, and fill a lonesome girl's mail box.

DORIS JEANE SWAIN
Star Route,
Zalmar, Mo.

Don't Let Him Down

Dear Editor:

Just read about your Carryin' The Mail, and am hoping I can get into the swing. I'm a serviceman, stationed overseas, and would sure like to hear from guys and gals all over. Will exchange pictures and answer all letters. Am 20 years old, 6 feet, 1 inch tall, 195 pounds, blond hair, brown eyes. I like dancing, skating, horseback riding and all sports. Don't let me down at mail call.

PVT. THOMAS S. CWIK
RA16433272
6999 S. V. Carrier Co. No. 2
A. P. O. 660 % P. M.
San Francisco, Calif.

In Need of Mail

Dear Editor:

I am a lonesome blue-eyed Finlander who doesn't get much mail. I have blond hair, am 5 feet 2, weigh 130 pounds and am sixteen years young. My hobbies are writing and receiving letters, dancing, and listening to Western music. I promise to answer all.

LAILA PERALA
Box 129
Makinen, Minn.

Wants to Write to Gals

Dear Editor:

You have a wonderful magazine and I have enjoyed reading it. You publish good clean stories that appeal to most all people. I am a young man in my thirties, and would like to hear from girls only, of all ages, who like to fish, hunt, swim, play ball, read, write letters, etc., but do not care to dance. I am 5 feet 8 inches tall, slim, have light brown hair, blue eyes, weigh about 140 pounds.

Have pleasing personality.

Guarantee to answer all letters.

M. O. SLETTON
P. O. Box 312,
Bemidji, Minn.

Lonesome Marine

Dear Editor:

I am a lonesome Marine, 10,000 miles away from home. I am a Yankee from Connecticut and I like to get mail. I am speaking for 25,000 other marines when I say it can get mighty lonesome over here. Would like to hear from girls between the ages of 17 and as old as they want to write. Will also write to men and kiddies. I am 18 years old, 5 feet 9 inches, red hair, brown eyes, weigh 155 pounds. I like all kinds of sports, especially football.

CPL. MICHAEL JASCENIA 1310736
Reg. Hq. Battery 11th Mor.
1st Marine Div F.M.F.
% F.P.O., San Francisco, Calif.

(Continued on page 110)

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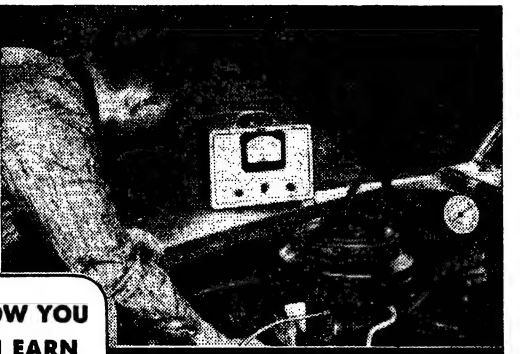

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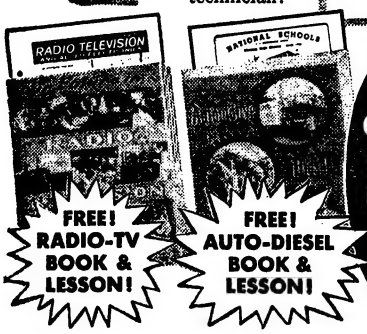

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BAD MAN IN HER HEART

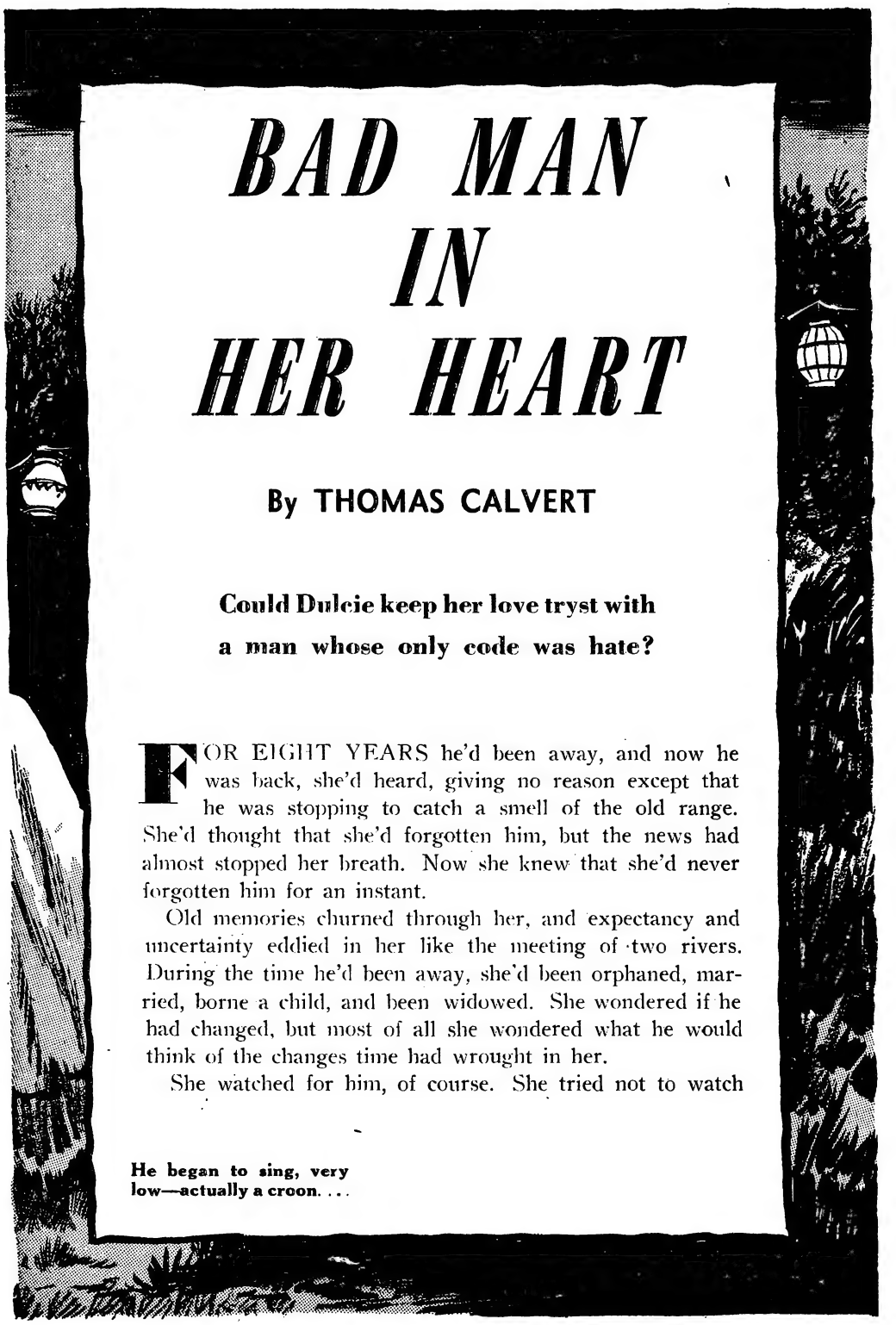
By THOMAS CALVERT

Could Dulcie keep her love tryst with a man whose only code was hate?

FOR EIGHT YEARS he'd been away, and now he was back, she'd heard, giving no reason except that he was stopping to catch a smell of the old range. She'd thought that she'd forgotten him, but the news had almost stopped her breath. Now she knew that she'd never forgotten him for an instant.

Old memories churned through her, and expectancy and uncertainty eddied in her like the meeting of two rivers. During the time he'd been away, she'd been orphaned, married, borne a child, and been widowed. She wondered if he had changed, but most of all she wondered what he would think of the changes time had wrought in her.

She watched for him, of course. She tried not to watch



He began to sing, very low—actually a croon. . . .

the door, which would be too obvious. Instead, she watched Red Herrigan, who was big and tall and easy to keep spotted, and who had been Dexter's partner when they both hit the trail.

Red had come back two years before . . . jingle, jangle, full of tales and toting gold, hard as nails with the nine notches he boasted on that gold-etched, silver-plated Colt he wore. There was rumor that he bossed a hardcase outfit headquartered somewhere out in the barrens beyond the grazing range. According to gossip, the sheriff had warned him to keep his outfit and its rough business out of town if he wanted the freedom of the town himself.

Both stories might be nothing but idle rumor, but they would not have been out of keeping with the country and the day in any case. It was but twenty years since the Texans had invaded in open warfare; less than ten years since the last Apache raids. Each county was an empire unto itself. What its citizens did beyond its borders was each one's own business, provided he behaved himself at home.

Nobody held it against Red that he had done a little more fighting than most, and might have business that was not extra proper. His notches gave him the right to his spur-dragging arrogance and occasional bursts of violent temper. Whatever else, he spent his money, and the sound of hard money traveled a long way.

The girl knew she was running a chance in eyeing Red so much. With his vanity, he was bound to take it wrong. Several times, he'd tossed his loop her way, and lately she'd felt a smoldering danger when alone with him. She was speculating on just how long she could hold him off in friendly fashion, when she felt the grip upon her elbow.

She turned with absolute sureness, eight years melting off her as snow melts off an east slope under the burn of March suns.

"Dexter!" she murmured, even before she fully saw him.

He stood there smiling. A hard trail had etched its lines into his dark-burned face. The hardness was in his mouth and the set of his jaw, and at another time, she imagined, it might lie in the slash of his slate-blue eyes. But right now, they were gently dancing.

"Dulcie!" he said. His voice was low and full with meaning, as if he had waited a long time to speak her name, and now the chance to say it filled him with throbbing satisfaction.

He took her hands and stood off from her, looking her over while his smile deepened. "Dulcie," he repeated, "time's done nothing but make you blossom like spring rains upon the desert. It was worth the ride home just to see you."

Warmth rushed clean down onto her shoulders. Her pulses raced, her cheeks flushed, an inward brightness turned her brown eyes to softest gold. She felt as chaotic as the girl she'd been when he went away. But she said, "I'm an old lady now and every young belle in town will be setting her cap for you!"

"They will be after the wrong man, then," he said. "I didn't ride a thousand miles to frisk up a bunch of broomtail fillies."

She eyed him archly. "Don't tell me you came home just to see me!"

She thought he'd chuckle some half kidding answer, but he didn't. His brows furrowed with puzzlement. "I'm not sure that wasn't just it," he said. "I figured you'd be married, but I kept thinking of you all the same. Like a thirsty man keeps remembering some special cool sweet spring."

She gave a little disbelieving gasp, yet his words eddied within her giddily and she filled with a woman's pleasure. The fiddlers struck up, and she lifted him a bright inquiring gaze.

He shook his head and made a motion toward his hip. "I haven't checked my gun yet. Anyway, I want to talk. I need to thaw the ice of coming home."

"Of course," she agreed, and took his arm, and was glad he'd said it. She needed time to quiet her own tumult.

They moved toward the ice cream tubs through a passage of friendly grins and welcoming remarks. He'd been a wild but straight young buck, and was well remembered on this range.

They came abreast of Red Herrigan, and stopped. The two men didn't shake hands, but they stood looking each other over with the slow grins of old friends meeting. Herrigan said, "Well, boy, you took a long time showing! From the grapevine I've heard on you, you've been knocking around Texas like a tumbleweed."

"Heard you did a little moving about yourself." Dexter chuckled.

Herrigan nodded at Dexter's gun. "Still wearing the mate to mine, I see."

"Now then," Dexter grunted with friendly dispute, "there is a mite of argument over that. I would put it the other way."

Herrigan grinned, "Well, no matter. It is a pair that belongs together."

"Mebbe they will be yet. Who knows?" Dexter answered.

The men poked each other and grinned. "I'll be seeing you," Dexter said, and he took the girl's arm to guide her on.

She caught the briefest glance of Herrigan's face as they turned away. The humor had left his expression and he was watching her with leaden eyes. Jealousy's cruelty lay on his mouth, and his love was hard and ruthless and predatory. For that instant, she felt a cold dark shadow touch her, but then she felt the gentle strength of Dexter's hand, and her fears vanished.

THEY GOT ice cream and cake and moved out into the lively yard where the small fry were busy at a bonfire having themselves a marshmallow roast between bursts of horseplay. Japanese lanterns had been stretched off around the horse pond into a grove of trees, and the young bucks were lifting their girls aloft to light them.

Dexter took her down to where logs had been scattered around the pond, and they sat with the furious pagan afterglow of sundown reflected in the still mirror at their feet. He finished his refreshments first and leaned on his knees just soaking her picture in and smiling, content with the simple satisfaction of her nearness.

"Yessir, Dulcie," he murmured, "it is sure good for sore eyes to see you."

She slanted him a glance as she dabbled with her ice cream. "Of course, you may recollect that you are coming back about seven years later than you said," she pointed out.

He scratched his jaw. "I reckon I was a mite delayed," he granted. "Hear Red's been back two years already."

She nodded and looked at him curiously. "What's this about the pair of guns? How come you and Red are wearing mates?"

"Well—" He chuckled. "Seems how there was a pretty rich señorita down Mexico way. . . ."

"How many cows and vaqueros were mixed up in it?" she interrupted.

"Oh, come to think on it, there were a few," he admitted. "And some banditti chief. Him not having any further use for the guns after we left him, we divvied. Then Red and me split up, and somehow never quite caught up with each other again."

She shook her head with a woman's gentle disapproval. "Still wild . . . still bad! You haven't changed a bit, Dex!"

He frowned and blew against his lips and looked off at the darkening horizon. "Too much," he answered after a long space of thought. He lifted the points of his wide shoulders and let them fall. "One thing leads to another, Dulcie, and then you find you've changed but there's nothing to do about it."

She felt some deep and bitter weariness in him that she hadn't noticed and her hand went to his with impulsive sympathy. "Dex,

you've never done anything you'd be ashamed of. I know. You're not the kind."

"Maybe not ashamed, but I've done too much," he told her. "No good comes of wildness, Dulcie." Then he squeezed her hand and gave a man's hard-bitten smile. "That's enough of that, though! I didn't aim to make my first meeting with you a funeral."

They sat on there, holding hands, while she gave him the gossip of the range and told him of the things that had happened to her. At first it was just as if the eight years had never been at all, but then she caught a different feeling. The eight years had been, but it was as if he'd been interwoven with them, and now was just home from some short trip. It was almost . . . as if he were her husband!

Dusk laid its velvet mantel of privacy around them, even though other lovers strolled nearby. The sound of the fiddles and call of the dance master mixed with the muted stomp of boots and clap of hands from the barn. And the bonfire spread its flaring light over the activity in the yard, so that they had the feeling of friendly sight and sound and company, but at a distance that did not crowd into their private world.

Looking back at the scene, once, he said somberly, "It has been a long time since I've known anything like this. It's good to come home. It's like a fresh drink when you're thirsty."

She watched the Milky Way begin to form in the circular blue-black mirror just below them. "What have you done for fun along the way, Dex?" she asked.

"Trail towns," he said on a note of disgust. "Trail towns and hell-raising until you couldn't get the taste out of your mouth and felt plumb dirty."

"Red Herrigan didn't seem to find them that way," she noted. "He's always boasting of what a hot time he had . . . of the crowds and games and excitement, and the fine foods and fancy fashions, and the way some of the places have brought chiefs and bands clean from New York, and mirrors and mahogany and pictures from all over the world."

"Well—" Dexter chuckled. "Red was always a little more for a hot time than I was. I still notice he came back and stuck here."

"But you?" she said. "You won't stay?"

She could picture him frowning as he looked off at the soot-black roll of the horizon. "I figure not, Dulcie," he acknowledged finally.

"Is the home range too tame for you now, Dex?" she asked. "Are your old friends too closed in and dull after the wide trail?"

His face snapped toward her, and she knew she'd hurt him, even though his expression was hidden by the darkness. "Good lord, Dulcie!" he breathed sharply. "Do you think I've turned like that? This country is God's own pasture, and you folks the salt of the earth!"

"But you don't mean to stay around."

He reached over and took her hand again. She could read his seriousness in the pressure of his hard-calloused hand. He said heavily, "Dulcie, it's not the range, it's not the folks around here. It's what's happened to me."

Emotions moved in a strong swell between them. Suddenly, and she did know which of them had moved, she was close by him, turned toward him, clutching his sinewy shoulders. She looked intently up into his face. "Dexter, nothing has happened that can't be lived down!" she told him earnestly. "Nothing could happen to a man like you. You're too strong. You make your fate!"

His arm came around her in a gentle bear hug. "Dulcie, Dulcie!" he said thickly. "Never a doubt in you, never a disloyalty!" Then he held her a little away and gave her back her intent gaze. "Have you forgotten that I didn't come back when I said I would . . . and that you waited a full three years?"

"You were just a boy, then. It was natural," she murmured. But she hadn't forgotten, and she dropped her face.

"Don't worry on me," he told her. "Just let me see your smile; just let me know your peace and goodness, while I'm here."

She pressed her face against his chest. "All right, Dexter," she agreed. Her throat was full and hot and she closed her eyes and clung there. Maybe that was better, after all. A woman, too, could grow thirsty for a little peace and honest friendship. A woman, too, needed a breathing space from the turbulent dissatisfaction of loneliness. He held her, rocking her slowly, almost as a woman would a child. After a time, he began to sing unconsciously, very low, actually a croon. It was not a lover's song he sang, neither sentimental nor lively in that way. But one of the mellow, thoughtless songs that men sing to quiet cattle or ponies . . . or sometimes just to quiet themselves when off alone in wind-swept space.

In time, the small fry exploded the lazy drifting mood of the night with cannon crackers. The two straightened a little self-consciously, and looked toward the yard and laughed. She tidied her dress and smoothed her hair. "Is the ice thawed yet?" she asked.

"Kind of boiling," he granted with a grin in his voice. "I reckon it's time for a dance."

THEY STROLLED back inside, meeting the knowing smiles of the gossips who began to dart their heads together like geese holding session. He swept her into a quadrille, his dancing so light and deft it was like a flow; so effortlessly precise that half the dance was over before she realized that he was actually the best dancer she had ever danced with.

She indicated that he could see her home, and then she was taken from him, for her card was promised and she was popular. When Herrigan claimed her for his dance, she sensed the rough possession in his grasp right off. But that same thing was there for any woman who took his momentary fancy, and never had his fancy lasted long.

He cut a figure on the floor, though; more of a figure than Dexter had. Of precision and lightness he had none, but he had a bull's vitality and a bronco's way of showing off. Of the two men, he was the one who cut the picture that caught the crowd's fancy. As he always had, even though it was Dexter who quietly picked up the top honors at almost any contest they had entered.

Her spirits were soaring now and she gave full play to the excitement in her. She had Dexter back; even though for this so short time. She meant to take this vacation with him and to forget the bleak loneliness that might come after. For right now she was young and carefree again, in a way that she'd not been since before her marriage. She meant to make the most of romance. She meant to play to beat the band.

It was almost dawn when the word came, spreading outward through the crowd like the circles made by a stone falling into a dead quiet pool. Old Scrooge Kelcey had been rustled and murdered out on his desert spread.

There was no love of Kelcey in those parts. He was a mean, conniving, vindictive old man. Nevertheless, that he'd been *murdered*, not simply shot, touched the community's charity, and perhaps something deeper.

Puzzled, Dexter commented, "I can figure the rustling worrying them, but why the sudden love of Kelcey? He wasn't above a few fast gun tricks himself when he was younger, and I can recollect a waterhole he poisoned."

"He's the fourth one this year," the girl told him. "Two of them were killed fighting, but far outnumbered. Kelcey's the second to be cold-murdered."

He gave a grunt of understanding, and got his gun and went out to join the men-

folk in the yard. They were pretty grim, for this was a small ranch country, and what happened to one man might happen to any other.

Old Caleb Moon had brought in the story, and he was quavering, " 'Tweren't no need to go a-killing him a-tall! That little mangy herd of his was a good mile off from the shack. But they snuck up on him first and shot him dead before he had a chance."

The sheriff was asking questions. The story turned out a little different than Caleb had told it, but in nowise bettering the character of the rustlers. They had apparently gone to the shack first to rob old Scrooge of his reputed hidden wealth, and had probably taken his scrubby cattle along simply as something extra handy.

The news broke up the dance. The sheriff and his deputy sank into the gray dawn's pearling mists, and shortly, buggies, wagons and ponies were clattering out of the yard. Dulcie gathered her four-year-old daughter from Mrs. Frye, who had tended her and twenty others good-naturedly, and trailing his pony, Dexter drove her buckboard out into the first misty rose and yellow light.

He wasn't very put out by Kelcey's death, but he commented at random, "Something new for this range. Old times were hellzapoppin, but it was usually man to man."

She said with a woman's anxiety, "It hasn't just been killings and rustlings, Dexter. There've been beatings, a lot of them, out at Ten Dance, and the boys don't dare talk. Two nester boys got put out of their own wagon taking their girls home one night, while masked men took away the girls and sent them home hysterical and dead drunk."

Dexter gave a cynical grunt. "If that happened, the girls were not too put out about it, you can bet on that!"

"Maybe," she granted. "But not another one who killed herself!"

He looked at her with sudden attention. "You mean that?"

She nodded soberly. "Then there've been so many road agent holdups that not even the freight companies want to freight in here any more."

"That's more than just a wild bunch," he allowed. "That's an outfit with a real chief . . . a tough one!"

She clung to his arm and nestled against his solid shoulder. "Well, maybe they'll get some of them this time," she murmured.

He shook his head. "Not likely, and it wouldn't do any good in any case. Only way to break a rough bunch like that is to get the head." He shrugged and yawned. "Well, that's all been outlying stuff. They're to cross the real range. Don't fret."

"How could a woman really fret with you beside her?" she asked, and he gave her a hug and looked down at the sleeping child and grinned.

CHAPTER 2 ♥ ♥ ♥

IT WAS sunup when they reached her house. The last mists had just broken, and the rambling roses and the lilacs were still fresh with dew, and little crystal diamonds fringed each blade of grass. The yard was spick as a pin, as were the small corrals. Stone borders and the gates were whitewashed and three flower beds were verdant . . . no mean task in this simmering climate.

He cut sign on the place and asked with suprise, "You keep a hired man here?"

"No." She laughed with pleasure. "It's all my work. But then, I don't have much else to do except on bake days." Baking, apparently was most of her widow's income.

He shook his head with bewildered admiration. It crossed his mind that she'd be, now, about twenty-four. Orphaned, wid-

owed, and with a child to support, and with all of the problems of a lone woman trying to stay decent in raw and rugged cow country. And with it all, she'd found the time . . . more important, the desire . . . to keep a place neat and cheerful and homey like this.

True, it was not a big place and it was not far from town, but big enough to take constant work, and far enough to be isolated in bad weather.

"Dulcie," he told her, "I never should have left!"

She turned sharply and looked straight into his face a long moment, her eyes turning dark as gold molasses. As suddenly, she turned away and started out of the buckboard.

"Hold on there!" he said, and grabbed her arm, and climbing over her, got down and lifted her down in turn. He sought for her eyes again, but she avoided looking at him, and then the little girl came awake and took her attention.

He walked the ponies out to the barn, put up the buckboard in an orderly open shed, watered and fed the stock, and scrubbing himself down at the trough, went in the kitchen way. Rich coffee and pancake and bacon smells filled the kitchen's welcome warmth, and the young lady, to whom he'd not yet talked, informed him she was Deecie, and would he comb her hair without hurting?

That was something of a chore for his rough hands, but between them they managed under Deecie's direction. By then she'd won his heart to such an extent that he didn't even notice breakfast was in front of him until her mother called it to his attention.

Afterward he took a stroll outside to see little Miss Deecie's garden, which consisted of about twenty radishes and some cherished weeds. Beyond it, her mother's garden was hoed and ordered and full growing . . . and silently, he tried to compute the number of buckets of water that had taken, and the mere thought made him sweat.

He took his leave, then, walking with them both, hand in hand, to his pony. Dulcie picked up Deecie, who put out her arms for a kiss. It was the first child that he had ever kissed, and he did it with a rough man's awkward gentleness, looking a little puzzled afterward, as if surprised at experiencing emotions that he had never suspected.

He swung up into leather after making a date for next day. For a moment he just sat there, soaking in the picture of the young golden-eyed mother and another man's golden-haired child and the strange reaction the little beauty had wrought in him. Then he touched his pony and drifted down the lane, and turning into the trail, looked back to wigwag, and mother and child both had an arm raised in farewell to him.

* * *

For a month they had their holiday, an almost carefree life of fun and romance. They had picnics and moonlight rides, and he took them up into the high hills fishing. He took her to races and dances and socials and clean over into the next county to a bucking bronc contest which he won. They had parties with old friends, most of them now married.

But most of all, he liked to laze in the hammock on her rose-screened stoop, with her sitting close beside him while they watched the sundown, and listened to the peaceful silence that is the voice of evening. These times he felt carried back and stripped of the hardness the trail had laid on him, for this had been her own home when he was a boy, and it was right on this stoop that he'd first tasted the eager sweetness of her lips.

Three or four times during the month, Red stopped by on pretext of seeing Dexter's pony and wanting the chance to palaver with him. Between the two men,

there was nothing but solid friendship. But when Red would look at the girl, his eyes would heat. Not just with sheer masculine interest any more, although he felt that too. She had never given him the privileges or play she was giving Dexter, and he'd remember it, and there was a cruelty in his eyes and mouth that said so.

When Red stopped by, she'd feel the dark chill of the future touch her, and a tenseness would set into her jaw, and her back would stiffen. But then Red would leave, and Dexter would take her hand, and instantly her nervousness would vanish like mists under the strong golden rays of sunrise, and she would put her arms around Dexter's neck and clutch him to her, finding him the dearer by comparison.

So all in all, the holiday was really that, even though somber winds played through the caverns of their deeper natures. Although he seldom spoke of it, and then no more than a sentence or a hint, she knew the set conviction that rode him that his life since he left had put corroding stains in him that never could be washed clean and that must never touch her, or little Deecie in particular. He was easing, though, as time flowed by, and whatever it was that he feared of himself failed to happen. Twice, he'd repeated her comment that there was good and bad in all, and so it must be that they were intertwined, and it was never too late to decide afresh whether the good or the bad would be the stronger.

HE BROUGHT it up himself the second time, going home from the Murdocks' kettle banding. It had been a gay, hilarious evening filled with laughter and excitement, but the occasion had pierced the shell of their holiday and touched poignant chords of loneliness in both of them.

They were traveling the mesa trail, with the moon-bathed sweetgrass sea bending and whispering on each side of them. He leaned forward on his knees, slapping the sleek rumps of the team occasionally with the reins. He shook his head suddenly and said, "It is just no good, Dulcie. Once the bloodstains are on a man, they don't come off, and each time they grow drab, it takes fresh blood to brighten them."

She reached for his sinewy, flat-backed hand, pulling it by sheer force out of the grip of his other fist. "Why do you keep whipping yourself with that?" she breathed stridently. "Have you ever killed a truly good man, Dex?"

"No," he muttered. "But I have killed."

"So has the sheriff! So has almost every man around here!" she told him fiercely.

He shook his head. "That's different. They've killed human coyotes or human snakes, in self-defense, or in fighting for what was right. Some of my fights I've built for sheer glory, Dulcie."

She shook his shoulder. "Even out of that badness, good came, Dex! What of the men they'd killed? What of the harm they still would have done had they lived?"

"It is no good!" he said, and his voice held the hollowness of a lost man calling through dark caverns. "Don't you see it, Dulcie? The violence is there. It will crop up again."

She could have wept for the way he whipped himself, and she knew he was arguing against his love for her and Deecie. At heart, he wanted to stay, to settle and be married. There was no slightest doubt in her about that. There was no slightest doubt in him. He had admitted it.

"What if the violence is there?" she demanded. "You would never turn it on me or Deecie!"

"It would splash on you," he said with gentle sadness.

She angered at his stubborn insistence of the point, and so she said something she had not meant to say. "What do you think will splash on me after you're gone?" she demanded. "Every wild buck on the range will think he has free rights now . . . and some can be rough without cause!"

He gave her hand a squeeze. "When I go, I'll leave word with Red to watch out for you."

"*Red?*" she whispered as if she'd heard a snake. "He's the one I'm afraid of most, Dex! Have you noticed the way he treats a horse? He's less thoughtful with a woman!"

He looked at her with amazement at the violence in her tone. "Dulcie, have you gone loco?" he asked. "Red's a mite rough of manners, I'll admit, but he wouldn't harm a hair of your head."

"No," she agreed. "He'd just take my scalp for a souvenir, and I'm not talking fancy! Who do you think has been behind all this savagery on the range? *Red* . . . that's who!"

He stiffened and roiled. She could feel it, but too late. He said severely, "That's female-silly, and you should know it! Night of Scrooge Kelcey's murder, he was right with us!"

"Well, it's his outfit doing the mayhem," she declared. "You don't see it because you're his friend, and maybe he's yours. But he's gone bad on the world, Dex, and everybody knows it, and I will bet you ten to one that you aren't out of here a week before he stops by, drunk, on some trumped-up excuse."

He wouldn't listen to that kind of talk. Red was rough and tough and a wildcat in a fight, but he was no bushwhacking brute, committing killings and mayhem, nor would he permit it of his outfit.

They had a fight over it, bitter and flaring, the worse for all of the other pent-up emotions they had contained. He was feeling raw and corrosive when he said good night and took his own pony into town. And he was in no mood to be rawhided, which was something that Big Gotch Swinert, stoked up on red mule, was too dumb to know.

Swinert learned it quickly and horribly, with the violence of a striking tornado. Dexter came unleashed with a cruelty that surprised himself even through his anger. He broke half the bones in Gotch Swinert's beefy body, and then took Swinert's own gun and gun-whipped him until he sank into the slimy pool his own blood had spread through the sawdust. And then he crawled, blubbering and pleading for his life . . . for it did not look as if Dexter meant to see any life left.

Dexter hurled the gun at his head and knocked him cold, and then began to feel the opinion of the silent saloon dropping upon him as the blankets of cold drop upon the high mesas after a winter blizzard. At first, there was not even criticism on men's faces. There was just sheer shock that a man could be so savage over such a minor matter.

He started to justify himself to himself, and then flared at himself, "Hell, that's just what I've been telling her! The bad has rooted there . . . the bloodlust . . . and it will break out into eternity!"

He ordered a quart and glared at the still silent room. After that he stalked out to ride the range the night through, drinking alone, whipping himself even harder than he'd whipped Swinert.

At sunup, he found himself overlooking Dulcie's, and after a silent struggle, put his pony down the slope into her yard. She came to the door smiling in the way of a woman who has cried through the night at some terrible mistake she's made.

He didn't see that, or if he did, he was too self-occupied to notice. He said somberly from the saddle, "Dulcie, I am checking out. You will understand when you hear the stories, later today."

Her hand went to her breast to ease the violent pains that pulled like wires around her heart. "*Dex . . .!*" she uttered, but then stopped. His face was like lava that is still molten underneath.

Deecie pushed by her mother and ran to him with her arms outstretched. "Uncle Dex, take me for a ride!" she called.

For a long moment he stared at her, his

face unmoving, but with those molten emotions coursing underneath. Then he leaned down and pulled her up and gave her a rough man's desperately gentle hug and kiss. He put her down, then, and touched his hat, and simply turned his horse and rode away.

The little girl stood with the tips of her little plump fingers to her cheek, looking after him with puzzlement. "Why mommy, he was crying!" she murmured.

HE RODE back into town, cold grim sober now. He took his time packing his warbag, eliminating the weighty things he didn't need. It was midway to high noon when he came down the steps at the hotel to find the lobby crowded.

There was an ugly smell to the crowd and the danger of a wild herd's growl in the low-voiced, muttering conversations. The sheriff was there and cut sign on Dexter and called out, "Boys, I think we can hold up our talk a spell while Dexter, here, checks out. For the benefit of any flashheads in the crowd, I'll say right now that he could not have been mixed in this, for all that he's Red's friend."

Dexter put down his bag and looked them over from the second step. He snagged out the makings and rolled a smoke. "Just being as I am Red's friend," he said on a flatted note, "mebbe you'd best tell me what this is all about before I check out."

The sheriff frowned and chewed at his mustache, then suddenly said, "No harm. He knows, in any case, he was seen, and he sang the challenge after Longhorn, there, to come and get him if we were able!"

Dexter's eyes followed the sheriff's glance to Longhorn, who was a local stage driver, and who looked something the worse for wear and mighty grim.

"Longhorn, there," the sheriff said, "was bringing the night stage through Canyon Diablo when he was held up by no less than twenty men. He was riding a shotgun and carrying two lady passengers with others. He was also toting gold, but it was hidden under the floor boards. The bandits were led by Red Herrigan."

"He's no angel, but no fool," Dexter cut in. "If he did hold up a stage, he'd damned sure cover his face!"

"He had it covered at the holdup," the sheriff said dryly. "But he couldn't find the gold, and took them aside for a little fun and torture. And by then he didn't mean to let any of them live, so he dropped the bandanna off."

The sheriff gave a few grim details that turned Dexter's face gray.

"Longhorn," he finished up, "made a sneak break while they were busy toasting the shotgun's belly. He managed to get a horse and stampede the rest and get clear of their bullets with only a few stings. That trail, there, drops off in a long series of switchbacks, and so he was able to hear Red's challenge even though it was shouted after he was several miles away."

"The ladies?" Dexter asked.

The icy flash of the sheriff's eyes answered him. "Longhorn heard one scream as he went downtrail."

Dexter stared at his smoking cigarette even after it was burning through his finger tips. Every man in the room watched him in utter silence. For all of their disapproval over his own actions of last night, he held that power . . . that honest men would wait to hear him speak his piece.

He dropped the bare end of his smoke and screwed his boot on it. He said on a flatted note, "Sheriff, no posse can get near him, and he'll pick you off like rabbits if you chase him into the Eagle's Eyrie country. There's only one trail up there. A lookout can see fifteen miles away. And a pebble rolling on that walled trail sounds like a rock slide. You'd have to go up single file, and he'd pick you off one by one."

"You're not telling us anything we don't know, Dexter!" the sheriff snapped. "But

you're his friend and we've got to plan. Mebbe you'd best go."

"Yeah, I'm going." Dexter nodded. "Right for Eagle's Eyrie." The slash of his eyes was like fire and ice. "I've got a little personal matter to settle up with Red. Mebbe I can save you gents some funerals."

The crowd muttered with mixed judgment of him. They had liked him once, and liked him lately. For all that, he had shown a pretty savage streak, himself, last night. He'd come back here with a pretty hard eye and pretty hard mouth, and he was a friend of Red's.

"Won't do no good to warn him!" the sheriff grated sharply.

Dexter turned at the door. "I'll warn him," he said. "For myself. You boys block what trails you like from this side, but you keep off the barrens until tomorrow sundown."

The muttering rose again, but no man was fool enough to try to stop him. They opened a passage and he moved through them without notice. He looked to his cinches, stepped into his saddle, and rode out into the shimmering yellow heat of late morning.

It was a four-hour ride to the barrens. It was another four hours across. He rode the regular trail at a steady pace, not trying to hide or cover himself from observation.

At sundown Dexter looked ahead to where the rock country rose like a thundercloud out of the barren plain. Atop the pile, a broken wisp of smoke rose like pencil strokes against the painted sky.

At the foot of the rocks he made dry camp, gathering his chips and making fire in open sight. He had supper and bedded down to solid slumber and at midnight came to at a kick in the ribs. Five men surrounded him with a throwdown on him, their figures dark and sinister against the star-washed darkness of the Western night.

The chunkier of the figures said, "Get up, and be mighty careful of where you reach."

He pulled to his feet, and the man snatched his gun out of his holster. "Who the hell are you and what do you want here?" the man rasped, and Dexter had heard more decency in the rattle of a snake.

"You're holding my passport," he told the man with thin arrogance. "Look at it, fella."

The man growled, but struck a match. He examined the gun, and his hard eyes darted across the flame to Dexter. "So you're the hombre who totes the twin of the chief's gun, eh? What you coming out here now for, with trouble starting? You've had a month and never come near the place."

"Shut your damned trap before I shut it!" Dexter told him curtly. "And take me to the Eyrie."

He heard the harsh rasp of the man's breath, and saw the drop and bulge of his shoulder. One of the others warned, "Take it easy, Slasher. Him and the boss been mighty thick."

"He don't smell right to me!" the one called Slasher rasped. "Coming like this, at this time, smells like pure snake!"

"I'll cut your damned tongue out for that and pin it to your chin!" Dexter told him. "You going to take me up there now, or do I have to have your own men cover you while I knock some of that tinhorn toughness out of you?"

Slasher growled and moved, like a caged animal, in his tracks, but he could feel the temper of his own men, and there were four. They might be scared of him, but they were far more scared of Red. He jerked his head and barked, "Get aboard your horse, then!"

"My gun," Dexter said, and his eyes drilled him against night's dim light.

Slasher stared, started to laugh, broke the laugh off, and finally slammed the gun into his hand.

"There's four men behind you, Dexter!" he warned.

The party swung into saddles and started off, passing into solid blackness, except for the strips of stars directly overhead. Chill filled this treacherous black trail, and only ponies that knew it could pass through it at night with safety. The sound of their hoofbeats traveled with them like booming drums, and the sound of rushing waters was a low roar out of the pitch darkness on his left. Once, his pony's hoof skidded on a pebble, and from the pony's violent movement to regain footing, he knew that, for that instant, he had hung over eternity itself.

At dawn, they came out of the head of the gulch and he looked across a churned-up sea of thick black shadows piling into gray-rose light in the east. They passed through boulders and climbed precipitously a short way, and came out on a small flat holding a stockaded corral and a forted stone-and-mud house.

"This it?" Dexter grunted.

Slasher looked at him and snorted an arrogant, nasty laugh. "This is just a shack, mister! You know our boss so well, you ought to know he'd live in class!"

Other men were here, getting up sleepily, or still playing cards and arguing in their cups. A marble-eyed, slashed-mouthed, hardcase outfit. Murder and mayhem were no deeper in them than you could smell. They gave him their blunt attention, but their reactions were inscrutable. They might be having fun pouring him out of his own hide tonight. Or they might be riding behind him of the morrow.

They rested their ponies and had breakfast and pressed on before sunup. On first sight, the top of this rock pile looked simply a chopped and creviced flat. But traveling, it became a maze of pitching trail . . . of gulches, drybeds, arroyos, and twistbacks through rock walls that pinched his sides, and tunnels and bridges that knocked his hat.

CHAPTER 3 ♥ ♥ ♥

AN HOUR past sunup, they came abruptly to the foot of a wall. All kinds of quarters were strewn out at the foot; some half-caves, some dugouts. But actually hanging against the wall itself above was a series of pueblo rooms. These were built in a concave hollow of the cliff, and it was clear they ran back into the rock itself. Rickety stairs had been pegged up to it, but throw down those stairs and the place would be impregnable.

Dexter had heard of the Eyrie but never had seen it. It had been built by Indians so far back that even the original tribe had been forgotten. Red stood on a landing of the stairs, his left hand on his thigh, his right hand on his gun. His hair was crinkly and his shirt open at the neck, and he was grinning. Standing that way, fresh from sleep, relaxed in his own fort, he looked like the wild hellzapopping kid who'd ridden out with Dexter eight years back . . . the buckaroo who took a cleancut pride in the risk he ran and fighting four square against odds or a better man. Dexter focused on the picture with a jolt.

"Welcome, amigo. You were a long time coming," Red boomed. He swept a hand in a gesture up the stairs. "Light and climb for second breakfast. Not many have the privilege of coming up these stairs and still walking down."

There was a warning in the words, but not a threat. It was clear Red thought he'd come to side him and join up with the outfit.

Dexter swung down and hitched his belts and mounted the stairs with Slasher right behind him.

Red turned and led the way up into the castle eyrie. The rooms were lighted from atop and so, even at this early hour, the vandal luxury of the furnishing was clear. A dozen very pretty mestizo girls peeked

out of doors. They were painted even at this hour.

Red gestured at a seat and threw himself down in a hide chair and hooked a spur into what had been a beautiful mission table. He spoke a word of Spanish and the girls scattered like quail to fetch refreshment. He sat there looking at Dexter and chuckling.

"Well, son," he grunted, "it has been a long time, but it will be good to have the guns together again."

Shiny goldpieces were scattered on the table and he gathered a few and dropped them through his fingers. Dexter nodded at them. "Off the coach?"

Red grinned with boastful pleasure. "Where else? Why go after them when they bring them to you?"

Dexter nodded. He said, "The town's stirred up. Things are like to get a little hot."

Red threw back his head and boomed his guffawing contempt against the rafters. "You lost your savvy?" he demanded. "You notice the trail coming up? I could stand and hold it singlehanded. I could sit up here a year and want for nothing the town offers."

"But you wouldn't," Dexter said.

Red gave a slow wink. "There is another way out, amigo. A little rougher trail, but it gets there." He set the goldpieces down with a *chunk* and the humor whipped off his face. "But that isn't what I aim to do. I mean to run this country with a whip. If they want safety, they'll buy it, but they'll crawl first!"

Dexter eyed him, and accepted the bourbon Red poured him. "How do you figure?"

"Well, I didn't figure that damned fool longhorn would make a break and get away, but now it's done, it's better," Red growled. "It puts the sheriff and any man who sides him on the spot. Either a posse will have to make a try at coming up here and get wiped out. Or it will spread through the barrens down below, for show."

He gave a wicked laugh, and leaned forward across the table. "And I have got boys who can slither like snakes and see in the dark and use a knife so quiet you wouldn't know it ten feet away, Dex."

He exploded his hand upon the table. "It's in the open now, and I'll whip this country so bad that my word is law! There'll be no more deals with sheriffs. They'll come with their hats in their hands and begging."

He lounged back, knocking the pile of goldpieces over carelessly. He grinned and again looked boyish. "I'm glad you came in at this point, Dex. Our guns paired together, we'll rule this land like lords!"

Dexter blew against his lips. He said, "I came so that the guns could be paired together the way they should be."

Red's eyes danced. "Truth is," he chuckled, "I was afraid mebbe you'd reformed, Dex. I was afraid mebbe you'd settle down to honest ranching, or just drift along, lone wolf, like you been doing, I hear."

Dexter said, "Outfits and segundos are not something I am used to. I have always figured man to man. If he is better than I am, let him show it, and I will give him the chance to show it."

Red snorted a cynical sound. "Old hat, Dex, old hat! Why stoop and bother to waste your own time on the herd when you can build a better herd to do it for you?"

Dexter spread his hands and watched Red, eye to eye. "It is still my way, Red."

Red frowned, darkened slightly, looked roughened, but it was his gaze which dropped. Dexter lifted his glass in a toast. "To auld lang synge, Red. It's been a long time since our trails forked."

Red lifted his glass, and they drank to that. Then the girls were hustling in a steaming breakfast. They ate in silence, Red darting Dexter occasional flashing looks of doubt as he began to catch his smell.

He sat back, long and slack, while they had second java, studying Dexter with narrowed eyes. "You said you came so the guns could be paired together again, Dex."

Dexter nodded and built a smoke. "That's right, Red."

"But you haven't said you came to pair up with me," Red growled.

Dexter nodded again and jetted smoke through his nostrils. "No, I haven't said that."

Red lunged his big chest forward over the table, and glared. "Dexter, you didn't come up here for the sheriff?"

Dex regarded him with a solid look. "You know better. What I do, I do for myself."

Red growled grudgingly, "Yeah. Yeah, I guess I should know that well as any man." He dropped his gaze again and looked raw and troubled. He ran his hand through his red mane and roughed it up.

"What the hell did you come for, then?" he demanded.

Dexter held both hands out upon the table. He frowned sorrowfully at the tip of his cigarette a moment, and then slashed Red with the whip of his eyes. "To fight and kill you, Red," he said.

Red half came from his seat. "You gone loco? Over that holdup that don't concern you?" His expression shimmered. "Or did it, Dex?" His color suddenly paled along the jaw. "One of those women aboard wasn't yours?"

Dexter shook his head. "I have no woman, Red. But there is one I should have had, and you want her. And when I'm gone, you'll have her, if you're alive to."

RED STARTED to make denial, then sank back into his seat. He took a cigar from a box and sat there tapping it on the table, regarding Dexter with wondering humor. "Same old Dex," he grunted. "Never changed a hair! Don't it occur to you that one little word from me and you'd be blasted like a sieve?"

"You won't give it," Dexter said.

"Why not?" Red asked.

"Because once you were four square and proud of it," Dexter told him. "And of all the men in this country, Red, I'm probably the only one who recollects it and thinks that, down underneath, you still are."

Red looked at his cigar and tapped it. He had a grin on his mouth, but it was the grin of a set jaw. Twice, Dexter saw him swallow. When he lifted his face, his eyes were shiny.

He pulled to his feet with an abrupt nod and threw down the cigar. "Guess you're right, Dex." He laughed ironically and his voice came thick. "Funny that a man can figure out everything except the thing that happens. This I never figured."

He put a glare at Slasher who was watching Dexter's back with narrowed eyes and hell's own anticipation on his face. Slasher grunted, "I knew I should have killed him down below and saved you the trouble!"

"Shut that!" Red barked. He jerked his head at Dexter. "Let's go, boy. Let's give the coyotes down below a show."

He led the way out, going down the stairs two at a time with a long-legged swing. He whistled out a horse, always kept ready, and swung into the saddle. He watched Dexter mount, his thoughts beating against the self-containment of his face and altering his expression as the sweep of sundown alters the face of rough country.

"You know this pack will riddle you even if you win?" he asked.

Dexter said, "I know."

They looked at each other a moment, gave men's hard smiles out of old memory and knuckled their hats to each other. "Who calls it?" Red grunted.

"You do," Dexter told him, and swung his horse away from Red. He let the horse walk at its own pace. Every muscle and nerve in his body was keyed. His gun arm was crooked and drawn back, his fingers

splayed like talons just above his gun.

Red sang out, "Get ready, Dex!" and an instant later, "Swing shooting!"

Both guns roared at the same instant, and both men jerked in their saddles, but fired again. The shots found meat again, but nothing vulnerable. Their third shots counted. Red half buckled forward over his saddle horn. Dexter stared at a gun arm gone numb and a hand frozen without control to his gun.

Red forced himself upright, breathing hard. He forced his gun up again, then cut sign of the damage he had done, and a wild smile jerked across his mouth. "Looks like old times," he rasped with effort. "Neither of us ever could win a fight with each other, Dex!"

Dexter looked across at him through morning's pure golden light. Not a sound broke the silence except the whistling rasp of Red's breathing, and the silence was filled with brute cruelty and savage vengeance. Red was breathing harder and his face turning putty gray. He waggled his gun. "Get going, now, Dex." He breathed hard. "This pack of mangy mongrels would show you things the Apache never learned!"

Dexter could still use his arm some. He forced the gun into his belt and lifted it in grim salute to Red. He swung his pony and saw Slasher lift his reins.

He heard Red bark, "Where you going, Slasher?"

"Just to see he finds the way," Slasher grated.

"He'll find it," Red gasped, and the words were coming harder.

"I'll make sure," Slasher growled, and started his pony.

"I said, he'll find it alone!" Red barked.

"And I said I'll make sure," Slasher repeated rebelliously.

A single shot rolled out. Slasher's pony bolted past, with Slasher rising and twisting grotesquely in the saddle. A few paces on, he pitched and dragged, and the horse came to a stop. When Dexter rode by him, his eyes were turned up and staring.

Dexter rode on down that trail with fever mounting in him. His one arm was useless, and his chest box had been creased. He was half delirious and clutching his pommel when he came out onto the barrens and caught the blast of afternoon's blazing dancing heat. His water was gone and he knew he'd never make town. But if he

RECKLESS LIPS

By Francis K. Allan

Maybe it's good to lose a world, if you're sure you'll win a heart. . . . But Jenny wasn't sure. . . .

This absorbing novelette of a girl whose heart steadfastly refused to be denied, is a treat you should not miss!

Also in the June issue, a fine line-up of stories by Joe Kent, Ouise Vaupel, Linda Barclay, Diane Austin and many other favorite authors.

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LOVE NOVELS MAGAZINE 25c

could make the edge of the barrens, the posse would find his body and cut sign. At least the girl would know that he'd done what he could.

Sundown was a riot of sound and color in his head, and then dusk was actually, physically, clutching him. It was clutching him with a grip and he'd been a long time on the ground before he realized that the light wasn't sundown, but a campfire, and that the darkness that had grabbed him had been human hands.

He blacked out, then, and opened his eyes finally into an eternity of soft light and friendly feelings and the knowledge that he was in gentle hands. His vision focused gradually and he saw little Deecie's golden head. She was sitting on the foot of his bed.

And then he saw Dulcie's face above him, and she was crying.

She came down on the bed beside him. She pressed her face against his neck. "You've had enough glory, now, for any man," she whispered intensely. "Red's outfit has been slipping out of the country like rats for two days, Dexter!"

He drew a long breath. He muttered, "Well, get me well and I'll slip with them."

She sat up abruptly. Almost, she shook him, forgetful of his wounds with her anger. "You've still got that in your head? Don't you see yet that the violence served for good?"

"But the violence was there," he said heavily. "It will always be there, Dulcie. I wouldn't have you risk it."

A man's low chuckle came from the other side of the bed. Doc Crawford's voice allowed, "Going to be awful hard for you to show off that wild streak after this, Dex."

Dexter turned his head with effort. "What do you mean, Doc?"

"Your gun arm's crippled for life," the doctor said. "Oh, I reckon you can learn to use it some again, but you won't be much on the draw or fast on the trigger. The muscle was severed and the nerves shattered."

Wild anger at fate filled Dexter until he came conscious of the quivering hope on Dulcie's face. Suddenly, great weights that he had toted inside of him a long, long time began to vanish like mists before a wind. He gave a wry smile and looked up at her and said, "Well, that's it. We have something to thank Red for. Good came out of bad, at that."

She dropped to her knees beside the bed and hugged him. Doc Crawford cleared his throat and left the room. Dexter had Dulcie's head leaning on one of his shoulders, and Deecie snuggled against the other, their low sobs of happiness were the most beautiful sounds he'd ever heard.

Sundown flared, and then dusk swept its purling tide across the country, and she had just fed him soup when a full-running horse drummed up around the house. There was a thump on the front stoop, and then the hoofbeats drummed back off into the darkness. The doctor was still there, and after a time of caution, he gathered the bundle and came in unwrapping the other gold-etched, silver-plated Colt.

"It would be Red's," he grunted. "But what is it doing here? Mean anything special, Dexter?"

Dexter's mouth set with sorrow for a good man that might have been, and a man who'd proved that at the end. He nodded in answer to the question. "It means Red's dead," he said.

The girl started toward him, and then pulled back. And knowing how very deep the feelings of loyalty and friendship and love can be, she took her daughter's hand and followed the doctor out into the other room.

"Mommy," little Deecie whispered, "I think he was crying again."

Dulcie laid her fingers on the child's lips. "Hush, dear, he isn't crying. He is just sorrowing for the passing of a friend," she said. ♥ ♥ ♥

GUNMAN'S GAL

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

What can a gal do when her dream man loves her—and his freedom, too?

"Reckon these two gals are both in love with you, Sam," the cornered outlaw sneered.

THE DANCE was being held on the second floor of the adobe two-story building which Nora Burton's father owned, and where, on the first floor, he operated his general store. The dances were a monthly affair and attracted everybody over ten. Now and then the evening ended up in a fight; there'd even been gunplay, though Nora's father mostly knew the ringy ones and made them check their hardware downstairs.

Nora was dark-haired, brown-eyed, and looked as if she had a touch of Spanish blood, though she hadn't. She wore a pink dress and a yellow silk shawl over her shoulders. She'd danced every dance so far, and there were men waiting to ask her for more, but when she saw the leggy, un-

ruly-haired man walk into the room, her heart skipped a beat or two and she went to him just as though two years hadn't separated them and everything was just as it had been.

She said, "Sam! Sam Doran!"

His eyes, busy searching the crowd, hadn't seen her approach from the side. He turned quickly and reached for her. She came only to his shoulder, so lifting her was easy, and he danced a few steps while she was pressed close to him.

Then he set her down and grinned from ear to ear. She saw that he was dressed in fancy clothes. A checked vest, split-tailed coat, shoestring tie—and a gun well hidden under the coat as though he didn't want anyone to know he was armed.

Sam said, "Here I been looking for you, Nora, and you were right under my eyes. Stand back, there, and let's have a look. H'm-m—you growed some, but you're still a shorty. You know—I like 'em short like you. Easier to tame."

She said, "My—you've done some changing yourself, Sam. You used to be so quiet, sometimes I thought you'd gone and died on me."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Reckon I've changed, all right. Been far and wide, having fun and learning things. Saw your pa downstairs. He looks real good. So do you, I might add. So do you, honey."

She wasn't sure she liked him this way—brash and bold. But his eyes seemed to be begging her not to believe what her eyes saw and her ears heard. It was almost as though she sensed that he really hadn't changed at all. Before she could give this idea some thought, he swept her into his arms and danced her onto the floor.

He said, "Two years is a long time, Nora. I been a danged fool to stay away so long."

"But you had to better yourself. . . ." she began.

"Heck with that. I might have lost you. Ever since I headed home, I wondered were you married up with somebody. Made up my mind if you were, he'd better be a mighty good man or I'd blow his fool head off. I used to be in love with you, Nora. I never had the nerve to tell you, but I was."

She said, "Yes—I know, Sam."

"I still am," he whispered. "Reckon I'm the kind of a galoot don't ever fall out of love when the right girl comes my way and you sure are the right one. You been spoken for, Nora? Am I talking too danged much?"

"You do talk on and on," she said with half a smile. "But I'm not spoken for."

"Then I'm in luck. I think I'll. . . ."

She felt him grow rigid and he was looking over the top of the crowd again. Suddenly he let go of her. "I'm sorry, Nora, but a man just came in who I've got to see. It's business, but it won't take long. You will wait for me?"

"I'll be here," she said. But as soon as he left, she slipped out the back door, down the rear steps and into the big general store. It was cooler here, and quieter. Also dark, so that there were few distractions and she could think. There was no denying that Sam Doran had an effect on her, even after two years. She was sure she liked him more as he used to be, but that didn't seem to make much difference. Two years can change a man and she wondered just how much he had changed. He was gayer, more talkative, maybe even a bit handsomer, but the old Sam Doran had possessed more appeal than she liked to admit.

She wondered why he had come back—where he'd been and whom he had known. Certainly he looked prosperous and entirely competent, as if he too had done a lot of growing up.

Nora drifted over to one of the windows overlooking the corral back of the store. She saw the two men in profile. It was dark, and the yellow light from the lamps in the dance hall above provided little illumi-

nation for her to make out who they were. One was Sam—that much she was certain of, and he seemed to be in close conversation with the other man. While she watched, the second man finished rolling a cigarette, and now he struck a match and held the flame toward his face.

She gasped, for that face was familiar. There could be no mistaking it. Johnny Grant was about thirty-five, a gaunt man with big floppy ears and a hooked nose. He had a wide slash for a mouth and a bulldog chin. An easy man to draw—and she had seen that face drawn and printed on wanted notices outside the sheriff's office. Johnny Grant was wanted for a dozen crimes and the one thousand dollar reward offered for his capture indicated just how much of a bad hombre he was.

And Sam Doran had slipped out to meet him, to talk quietly and confidentially to him. That meant Sam could also be an outlaw. Nora had heard her father say that Johnny Grant only seemed to work alone, but that he must have inside help or he'd never be able to get away with the jobs he pulled.

JOHNNY GRANT threw away his cigarette presently, slipped off into the dark, and she heard him ride away. Sam walked slowly toward the steps leading to the second floor where the dance was going full blast. She opened the door and walked out. He gave an audible gasp when he saw her.

"Nora—I thought you were upstairs."

"It's too hot up there," she said. "I came down to the store to cool off. Will you come in, Sam? There's some soda pop and it's quite cold."

"You—saw me and my friend out there?" he asked.

"Yes—I saw you. Who was he, Sam?"

"Just a friend. Yes, I'd like some cold soda pop."

They stepped inside and he closed the door. With two long strides he overtook her and his hand touched her shoulder. She turned to face him. She didn't want to, but she found that she couldn't help herself. There'd been too many sleepless nights thinking about him, too many dreams in which he was the dominating figure. She went into his arms quite automatically and accepted his kiss, gave it back with added warmth and let him hold her.

She said, "Sam . . . oh, Sam, I know you're going away again. Why did you come back if it wasn't to stay?"

"I won't be gone long this time," he said. "Not two years, you can bet. Not even two weeks. But tomorrow I've got to leave on the stage."

"Why, Sam," she cried in happy anticipation. "I'm taking the coach too! I'm going to Questa."

"That's north," he said. "Near Red River Pass."

"I know. I'm going to visit my aunt. Are you traveling that far, Sam?"

He grasped her by both shoulders so hard she felt the pain down to her wrists. "Don't go," he said brusquely. "Don't take that stage, Nora."

"But why? Sam . . . what is it?"

"Never mind." His voice was rough. "Do as I tell you and take the stage day after tomorrow."

She said, "Unless you tell me the reason, I won't delay my trip."

"I can't," he said desperately. "Just take my word for it, Nora. It's for your own good."

"I'm sorry," she said.

He suddenly kissed her, hard and long. When he broke the kiss, he still held her tightly and begged her to change her mind.

She said, "No—not unless you tell me why. Sam, I think you're in some sort of trouble. I . . . did recognize the man you were with a little while ago. He was Johnny Grant. Sam—why is he your friend? The sheriffs of ten counties want to hang him."

"You'll have to take my word that I'm not involved the way you may think I am, Nora."

"I'm not sure of your word," she said. "Let go of me, Sam. You've been gone two years and you offer no explanation. You just come back, walk in and you wear a hidden gun. I felt it under your coat. Your friend is an outlaw and you act so secret and oddly, I think you're an outlaw too."

"Would it make any difference?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said candidly. "I'll need time to think that out."

"Take time," he urged. "Just be fair; but Nora, don't take the stage tomorrow. Please."

She said, "If I'm on it, you'll know my answer, Sam. It will mean I can't accept your word blindly. It will mean I don't trust you any more."

"I don't care what you think, just so long as you don't ride the stage. Listen, there'll be fifty thousand in gold on it. Nobody knows that. . . ."

"Then how do you happen to know it?" she asked quickly.

He looked as if he wished he'd bitten his tongue off. With a savage oath he turned away from her and walked out quickly. She stood there, badly disturbed. She might have been too harsh with him.

The rest of the dance hardly existed for her. She danced with other man, talked to them and hardly knew what she was saying. That night she slept only in short stretches which were disturbed by dreams about Sam. She was up at dawn, glad of the daylight, and two hours before stage time she was dressed and ready. Her father seemed surprised to see her up so early, but he appreciated the big breakfast she'd prepared.

"You see Sam Doran last night?" he asked with a sly grin.

"Yes—he was at the dance. Did you run across him too, Pa?"

"Sure did." He poured a thick stream of molasses over his hot cakes. "Came into the Frontier Café about ten o'clock. Lucky thing he did, too. Old Pete Lawlor, who rides shotgun on the stage, was stuck up last night and banged on the head. He couldn't ride, so Sam Doran offered to take his place."

"Sam is riding shotgun on the stage I'm taking?" she asked in sudden horror.

"That's right. Why do you act so surprised? He tell you he was settling down? Reckon he will, Nora. He told me he was coming back to stay soon's he finished his job."

For one wild moment, she almost told her father everything she knew, but that might be an injustice. Sam had asked her to trust him, but now she wondered if she could. He'd been talking to Johnny Grant, whose specialty was holding up stage coaches. Fifty thousand in gold was riding that coach, too. Everything pointed to Sam as an accomplice, and now the shotgun guard had met with a convenient accident and Sam was taking his place.

Her father said, "You'll have company on the ride. Two Fargo Express detectives are going along."

"Detectives?" she gasped.

"Don't worry none," her father assured her. "Nothing will happen with them two along. Well, it's time you fetched your bag and got started."

She almost decided against going, and then she knew she had to go. Sam wouldn't know the two passengers were detectives. Perhaps they suspected something and were there to watch him—perhaps shoot him if there was trouble. She ran to her room, picked up the suitcase and hurried out. Her father carried it to the stagecoach and Sam stood there watching them approach. He wore cowboy shirt and boots this time and there was an ugly sixgun at his hip. The fancy Stetson was replaced with a worn, flat kind of a hat and the face beneath it had changed too. Sam Doran was desperately grim.

He took her suitcase, went around to the back of the coach and opened the boot. He got the case inside and stood at the back of the coach as if he didn't want to talk to her.

Nora's father helped her inside. She wanted to wait until the last moment, to get Sam aside and warn him. Somehow, she knew, she must warn him, but there was no chance. As her father kissed her good-by and added a few last minute messages for Aunt Martha, Nora saw two heavy-set men walk casually toward the coach. Nora's father introduced them as Billy Ross, a forty-year-old, red-faced man with a dirty shirt and a dirtier necktie. The second man was Lou Kendall, raw-boned, taciturn sort who only nodded acknowledgement of the greeting. He would be the dangerous one, Nora decided. The one who'd draw fast and shoot fast and not care much what he hit.

Old Pop Johnson came out of the hotel carrying a very heavy sack which outlined a strongbox so clearly there was little question what it contained. This he handed to Sam who, in turn, passed it up to Pop after he had climbed onto the high seat atop the stage.

"Hang on, folks," Pop yelled. "We're ridin' and we'll soon be bumpin'. Ain't responsible for busted arms or necks. Get aboard, Sam, and let's get outa here."

Sam threw one final glance into the coach before he climbed up to join Pop. Nora tried to signal with her eyes, but all she got back was a bleak look and she remembered what she had told him. If she rode the coach, it would be because she didn't believe him.

Lou Kendall stared straight ahead, the corners of his mouth down, lips pulled together hard, and he never uttered a word. Billy Ross talked about everything he could think of so that Nora was bored before half an hour of riding had passed. She answered him vaguely and tried to think of some way to warn Sam. There wouldn't be a stop until after they passed through the gorge.

It would have to wait until then—until they were at the relay station. If anything happened before then, she couldn't help it.

THE COACH had passed the town limits long ago, but now it slowed and made an unexpected stop at a crossroad where two silent, stern-faced men sat on their horses while a very blond, very cute girl in riding skirt and blouse walked toward the coach. Sam got down from his perch and went straight toward her. She put her arms around him, kissed him soundly, and he grinned and waved to the men watching before he tucked her hand under his arm and led her to the coach. He opened the door.

"This is Kate Miller," he said. "Her pa runs the Double E spread just east of here. Kate, this is Nora Burton. Her pa owns the general store back in town. The gents, I don't happen to be acquainted with."

He helped her inside, closed the door, grinned at Nora and swung up onto the high seat again. The coach rumbled off.

Kate gave Nora a shy look. "You're very pretty," she said.

Nora smiled slightly. "Thank you, Kate. Have you known Sam long?"

"Sam?" Kate asked. "Oh—you mean Chuck, the man who introduced us. Yes, Chuck Ramsey has worked for my father a long time. He's kind of free with his kissing and hugging in public, but I guess it's all right because we're going to be married next month."

Nora's gasp of astonishment made Billy Ross frown. Ross said, "One of you ladies called him Sam, the other said Chuck. He a man with two names?"

"His right name is Sam Ramsey," Kate said very quickly. "Everybody calls him Chuck."

"He's been working on your pa's spread a long time?"

"Between three and four years. Chuck's nice. He's a little lazy, I guess, and nothing bothers him much, but I like him."

Nora's nails bit into the palms of her hands and she knew her face had gone a dead white. She quickly looked out of the coach window and saw that they were ap-

proaching the gorge entrance. It was a deep crevice in the mountain, forming two towering, sheer walls of solid rock shutting out so much sunlight that the gorge was actually murky. There were ledges, high up. Men could climb and ascend these walls without too much effort for they were broken and rimmed in many places. The farther section was narrowest, like the exit from a funnel.

When Nora turned her eyes away, she realized that Ross and Kendall were also half leaning through the coach windows and looking up. They expected trouble. If the coach was going to be held up, this was where it would happen. It wouldn't be the first time, either.

Kate sat with the large handbag she carried on her lap and her hands under it as if for warmth. Kendall was eyeing her openly and she avoided his insolent stare. Nora could almost read what was on Kendall's mind.

Suddenly there was a rifle shot, a cry of pain. The coach lurched to a halt and Pop Johnson toppled off the seat and came crashing and plunging to the ground, where he lay very still.

"You girls stay inside," Ross said roughly. "Let's go, Lou."

Kendall jumped out, drawing his gun as he did so. He ran from the coach, whirled and pointed the gun at the seat. "You—come down real easy-like," he ordered.

Nora cried out Sam's name and moved toward the door. Kate suddenly grasped her shoulder and pushed her back. "Be quiet, you fool," she said.

"But he's in danger. Those men are detectives. . . . "

"Sam knows that. I told you—be quiet or you'll get hurt. If you can't think of yourself, think of Sam. He's in danger too."

Nora said, "Kate, I know he must love you very much and that's all right even if I'm in love with him too. But Sam is part of the holdup gang that's been stopping stagecoaches all over the area. Sam's friend is an outlaw named Johnny Grant. . . . "

Kate said, "Nora, I'm begging you, don't say anything more. If those men hear you. . . . "

"But we've got to do something. Sam's friend must have killed the driver. When he rides up to loot the coach, the detectives will be waiting. They suspected there'd be an ambush. And you made them suspicious by calling Sam by another name. . . . "

"I made them suspicious," Kate said. "You little fool. If you had any faith in Sam, you wouldn't even be here to make things harder for him."

"What about you?" Nora said angrily. "Can you help him? Did you know those men were Fargo Express detectives? They're here to catch Sam. If we work together, maybe we can stop them."

"So that's why you came," Kate said slowly. "You had a crazy idea you could help Sam. You're a bigger fool than I thought you were. Look. . . three men riding this way. . . . "

Nora said, "I'm not going to just sit here and let Sam get killed. . . ."

A rifle cracked somewhere. One of the riders coming at full gallop, seemed to shoot out of his saddle and go sprawling on the rocks. The other pair reined up fast. Guns flashed, but the rifle was silent. The two riders got off their horses and scampered toward the wall side of the gorge, to clamber up onto the rocks.

Outside the coach, Sam stood with his hands in the air. He faced the coach and he looked inscrutable. Billy Ross and Kendall had their backs toward the coach, but they had guns in their hands to keep Sam covered. It seemed something had gone wrong with someone's plans.

Kendall said, "Who fired that shot, Chuck?"

Sam replied, "How do I know? What's the idea of holding me up while outlaws are bearing down?"

"We're after that gold you got up there," Ross said. "We're taking it too. And we're taking the two girls, but we'll let you stay. Hell, the vultures need feeding."

Sam said, "I thought you two were Fargo detectives."

"We are." Ross chuckled. "We're also rich detectives. We been staging these stickups nice and regular and blaming it all on Johnny Grant. But this time we came for the ride."

"Those men heading this way—they work for you," Sam said.

"Sure do," Ross said.

Kendall said, "Lemme finish him off."

"Take your time, Lou," Ross said, and, with a note of apology, he added, "Lou's kill crazy. You see, we figure there's something wrong about you. One of them gals called you one name, the other said you were Chuck Ramsey. Got me an idea something was up when the regular shotgun guard didn't show. Now, I'm asking you real nice—but for the last time—who was that up there with the rifle?"

"Johnny Grant," Sam said tersely.

Kendall swore, and half turned to look up at the walls of the canyon. But his eyes never traveled upward, and his jaw dropped a notch at what he saw. Kate held a sixgun in a steady hand and it was pointed right at Kendall. The crooked detective shouted a warning and tried to bring his gun up. Kate shot him through the arm, and the gun flew out of his hand while blood ran down to spread all over the wounded hand.

Kate said, "Hands up, Ross! Or I'll put one in the middle of your back."

Sam said, "She means it, Ross. And she can shoot like a fool."

"What is this?" Ross demanded, but he dropped the gun and raised his hands.

Kate said, "Nora, climb down and pick up their guns. Hand one to Sam and keep the other yourself. Watch it now—their pals are up there some place and they may try to pick us off . . . ."

A rifle cracked. A bullet hit the gorge wall behind the stage and ricocheted wildly. Sam sprang forward, pushing Ross out of the way, sending Kendall reeling aside with the heel of his hand. He scooped up one gun. Nora jumped to the ground and got the other. Sam backed Ross and Kendall up to the coach.

"You jaspers are living on slim time," he said. "I know you been crooked and planning these jobs and throwing the blame on Johnny Grant. Sure, Johnny's been owlhooting and he'll be punished for it, but he never killed anybody and he won't swing because you'll do the swinging."

Suddenly Kendall did a neat pivot and leaped around the corner of the coach. Kate was still inside. Kendall grabbed the door handle on the opposite side. Kate, watching Ross, didn't realize she was in danger. Sam, also busy keeping his eyes on Ross, didn't see any of it, but Nora knew what was going to happen. She raced to the back of the coach, raised the sixgun she held and fired.

Kendall, in the act of climbing inside, let out a bleat of alarm and raced toward the gorge wall. He dodged behind a big rock, scurried farther up and found more shelter. He kept on going.

NORA hurried back to where Sam stood. Kate said, "Nora—thanks. I was wrong about you."

"It doesn't matter," Nora said. "I was a fool, but we're in this now and we'll help. Sam . . . are you all right?"

"Fine," Sam said. "But Pop is dead. I didn't expect the attack so soon. Lucky Johnny did though. He must have trailed them jaspers up in the rocks."

Ross said, "You're very smart, Sam, or whatever your name is. Very smart indeed, but you don't hold all the cards. In the first place, you're outnumbered and we can bring in more help. All you got is an outlaw up there some place."

"And us," Nora said firmly.

Ross laughed. "You're no help, ma'am, if you don't mind my saying so. I got an offer, Sam. Let me go and take the gold with me. I'll take my boys off and you'll be safe. Otherwise—I hate to think of what will happen."

Sam said, "You forgot one thing, Ross. Whatever happens, happens to you first. If your boys open fire on Kate or Nora, I'll shoot you down like a rattler."

Ross didn't laugh any more. There was a wild scurrying around up on the north wall. Stone came rattling down the rocky cliffside. Sam said, "Kate—and you, Nora—keep your guns on this skunk. His pals are trying to get closer, but they ain't showing enough of their hides so Johnny can get a bead on them. So we'll sorta scare them out into the open a little more if I can get at that shotgun I left on the seat."

Nora said, "Kate—you cover Sam while he gets the gun. I'll watch Ross and, believe me, I'll shoot if he even breathes too hard."

Ross said, "Whatever happens, Sam, I sorta admire your taste in women. These two are real wildcats. Reckon they're both in love with you from the way they were acting before all this started."

"Shut up," Sam said. "Watch him, Nora. Kate, start peppering the rocks. I got plenty of cartridges, so don't worry none about using too many."

Kate opened up while Sam clambered onto the stage, reached for the shotgun and a box of shells. He jumped down and grinned. Ross had taken half a step forward, then changed his mind. Nora's finger was white against the trigger. Ross relaxed with a long sigh.

Sam said, "All right, Ross, start walking."

"Walking?" Ross gasped. "Listen . . . they may not recognize me. It ain't none too bright in this damn canyon. . . . "

"Walk," Sam said. "The idea is to make your friends shoot, and if they hit you, the tears I'll shed wouldn't wet a gnat. I said move!"

Ross walked out beyond the coach and raised his hands high to signal his friends. Sam scanned the gorge wall carefully, the shotgun ready at his shoulder. A rifle cracked. Ross screamed as the bullet whistled past him. Somebody high up among the rocks stood erect for a better look. Sam fired both barrels of the shotgun. At that range the pellets weren't lethal, but the roar of the two shots made an unholy din and the man who showed himself lost his head and scurried upward for more distance. He gained about ten feet before he screamed, threw up his hands and started sliding down. Nora hadn't even heard the rifle crack. Sam reloaded, crawled up into the coach and was ready. Ross, running wildly down the gorge road, yelled at the same time. He veered, saw a rough trail up the wall and started along it.

Someone came from behind a big rock and stretched his hand toward Ross to help him. Sam fired both barrels. The man pulled his hand back and ran for another place of shelter. Johnny Grant, somewhere high up, got him. Ross twisted around and slid down to the road again. This time he just stood there with his arms high.

There was only one man left now, but Sam knew it would be Kendall, the deadliest of the lot. Kendall was wise, too, and he'd make sure that Johnny Grant never got a bead on him. For several minutes nothing moved.

Ross couldn't stand it any more. "Sam—give me a chance. Let me come back. Give me a gun. Please . . . and I'll tell you all about how me and Kendall been sticking up. . . . "

Kendall called, from his hiding place, "Figgered you were a skunk long ago, Ross. So long!"

Ross took the bullet between the shoulder blades and sprawled down on his face. Sam fired at the approximate source of

the shot, but all he drew was a laugh from Kendall and then a warning.

Kendall called out, "Got me a rifle and lots of ammunition. Got me a spot where you can't see me and neither can Johnny. I'm picking off the women folk first so I can watch you squirm, Sam. Watch how I do it."

Nora was moving before Kendall had finished. She saw Kate standing in the open, watching Ross to make sure he wouldn't get up and run for it. Nora sprinted toward Kate. Ten feet away, she launched herself into a dive. Her arms clawed at Kate's legs, brought her down with a thud. Something bit into Nora's side and she cried out. She got to her knees. Kate's arm was around her. They started running back toward the coach and dropped down behind it.

Kate said, "That bullet was meant for me, Nora."

"You're crazy." Nora tried to laugh. "It would have missed you by a mile."

"You didn't know that when you knocked me down."

"There wasn't time to call out," Nora said.

"Why did you risk your life that way, Nora?"

"Why? Because I like you. And then there's Sam. He's in love with you and I don't blame him."

Kate said, "I had to pretend we were going to be married because I didn't want those two crooked detectives to even guess he was Sam Doran. You see, Sam is a deputy, and he's been trying to solve these holdups for months."

"Then he isn't . . . that is . . . Sam is a lawman. But what was he doing with Johnny Grant?"

"That's easy," Kate said. "All the holdups were blamed on Johnny Grant. Kendall and Ross made it seem he was responsible. But the last two times, Johnny was in jail, so Sam knew Kendall and Ross lied. He let Johnny out on his word not to run away and Johnny's been helping him."

"I deserved to have that bullet nick me," Nora said. "I should have trusted Sam."

Sam cupped a hand to his lips. "Johnny! Hey, Johnny!"

Johnny called back.

Sam yelled, "Johnny . . . there's only Kendall left. We're closing in on him. He just put a bullet into my girl."

"Kate?" Johnny's voice was stronger.

"No," Sam yelled back. "My girl! You don't know her. Kate is fine."

"I'm coming down," Johnny called. "We'll squeeze him into showing himself."

Sam clambered off the stage, held the shotgun ready and ran toward the wall, where he crouched down quickly.

Nora said, "Kate . . . did you hear what Sam said? He called me his girl."

"That's right." Kate kept her eyes on the farther wall, her gun ready. "Johnny was worried about me. We were married three weeks ago. Johnny's quit the owlhoot trail and Sam is going to see he gets a chance."

"Then you . . . he. . . ."

"You should have heard Sam telling me about you last night," Kate said. "Nora—are you sure that wound. . . ."

"It's nothing," Nora said happily. "Nothing at all. What are they doing up there?"

"Johnny is coming down and Sam is going up. Kendall is somewhere between them . . . Sam is going faster now. Something must have happened. . . ."

Sam vanished for a moment. Nora got to her feet, impelled by sheer anxiety. Then she saw him again and he was waving the shotgun. He yelled down to them.

"Finished! Kendall lost so much blood from his wound he passed out."

Kate said, "Oh, thank heaven. Now I can go to Johnny. Isn't it great, Nora?"

"Sam called me his girl," Nora said. "Yes—great—about Johnny. His girl. I'm Sam Doran's girl!" ♥ ♥ ♥

HORSEBACK

The Cowcamp Lonesomes

When moonlight ghosts the cowcamp and the stars of heaven shine
So close above your bedroll you could reach 'em with your twine,
You lay there and you listen to the bullbat's lonesome whir,
And wonder if she thinks of you the way you think of her.
A feelin' stirs the gizzard underneath your leathered hide—
It ain't no use to fight it, for you couldn't if you tried—
A feelin' that you couldn't name, it ain't exactly pain,
And yet it sorter aches you in a way you can't explain—

You've been a cowhand quite a spell, you've rode the hoot owl trail,
You've smelt a little gunsmoke and you've even laid in jail.
You've drunk your share of whisky and you've et the roundup's dust,
You've set some rough ol' saddles when there's been a bronc to bust.
As a hired-man-on-horseback you have measured up to taw,
But life, the way you've lived it, has been purty rough and raw.

TROUBADOUR

By S. OMAR BARKER

You lay there in the moonlight with the stars so close above,
And wonder if you're worthy of that purty schoolmarm's love.
The fact is that you know you ain't. Your ways are crude and wild,
While hers are all so gentle, civilized, and sweet and mild.

How such a gal can love a man who don't know much but cow
Is more than you can savvy—but you love her anyhow,
And if you ain't mistaken in her kiss a week ago,
Her heart is yours to have and hold. How can a feller know
What makes a woman love him when she must be well aware
That he's a rawhide rannyhan who's done his thoughtless share
Of cowboy gallyhootin'? So you lay there wide awake,
And swear by all that's holy that from now on, for her sake,
You aim to try and measure up, in every word and deed,
To all the faith and loyalty that's in a woman's creed.

When moonlight ghosts the cowcamp and the stars are bright above,
You lay there in your bedroll feelin' lonesomely in love,
And while you lay and listen to the bullbat's whirring buzz,
You wonder why she loves you—but you're sure damn glad she does!

♥ ♥ WAGON TRAIL TO

THAT DAY when Ringo, the buffalo hunter and scout, was hired and took a long look at Rebecca Martin, most of the folks who made up the ten-wagon train bravely setting out for Oregon figured there would be trouble between him and Adam Gordon. There were some who grumbled a mite after casting back in their minds to the trouble the Martin wagon had already caused, what with its groaning overload. They all knew the worst of the trip stretched ahead as far as a man could see and beyond, and the Martin wagon was like an anchor dragging at their rear.

Marcus Rhul, who along with young Adam, had spent a quarter of the trip from the East unhitching his oxen and yoking them up to the Martin rig so that it could be yanked off stumps and out of bogs, had words which seemed to sum up things pretty well.

"A pretty, single gal like Rebecca ain't got no more right on a trip like this," opined Marcus, who that day had been designated lead driver for the rest of the hazardous trip, "than has that gol-danged piano and whatnot her aunt and uncle are dead set on carting clear to helloreegon. One can cause as much trouble as t'other, only in different ways."

Marcus was right, as everybody knew. But there wasn't much anybody could do about the Martin wagon nor its occupants. Deborah Martin and her husband, Christian, were the type that didn't brook interference where things religious were concerned. The massive piano with its polished mahogany woodwork and fancy hand carving was as important to Deborah and Christian as were the big boxes of Bibles and hymn books and the oak pew with the padded kneeling rail their wagon also toted. Deborah, most of the immigrants knew, had sacrificed many personal and household belongings to make room for these things, which took up a good half of their wagon.

"Personal belongings we can make or buy or go without," Deborah had said, and her lips had set firmly, as they did when her mind was set. "But in the wilderness we can't fashion nor buy nor do without God's tools. When we get to where we're goin' we'll build a church first off and that church'll need Bibles and hymn books and a voice. As to the pew, I'd sooner leave the wagon behind. It was my father's and his father's father's before him. You load your wagons and we'll load ours." And Christian backed up his wife's words with slow nods of his balding head.

At the time, back in a distant place called German Flats, most of the folks who were packing their wagons for the long trip West had agreed with Aunt Deborah, for they were all God-fearing members of the Palatin Church. While most took their religion more casually than Deborah and Christian did, they admired and respected those two for their stand and were glad to know that the word was rolling West with them, even though no true minister of the gospel was accompanying them, seeing as how the Reverend Mr. Wells had elected to stay back in the depleted German Flats. There were others, though, who predicted darkly that the wagon with its off-center load would prove to be a millstone around their necks, especially when they entered Indian country, as they were doing now.

Long before they'd reached Fort Union and hired Ringo, the hunter and scout, at the staggering sum of a dollar and a quarter a day, there were few of the settlers who didn't secretly wish the Martins and their piano and all had stayed back in Ger-

PARADISE

By FREDERIC SINCLA

"You brute!" she cried.

Rebecca's charms prodded sworn-enemy Adam Gordon into trespassing—on her heart. . . .

man Flats. Nobody'd say that openly, though, because the idea would somehow seem impious if spoken out loud.

Adding strain to stress on the jolting trip, the Martin's blond and perky niece, Rebecca, what with time on her hands and a light to her long-lashed blue eyes that was part curiosity and part calculation, had been tossing her gaze at big-shouldered Adam Gordon. By the time they'd reached Fort Union, Adam was as addled as a young man can be, and he had not yet even held Rebecca's small hand.

Adam's sister, Kathy, a slim whip of a

who wore her hair piled up inside man's slouch hat and togged herself out in jeans and shirt like the tomboy she was, got so fed up with Adam's mooning over Rebecca that she took her brown mare and moved out of Adam's wagon to take up trail residence with the Gottfeldt family. Kathy and Adam, who had fished and hunted and frolicked together back home, were more like brothers than brother and sister, because of Kathy's boyish ways.

The girl could ride and shoot better than any man on the train, and darkened now by sun, she passed for a boy without half trying. Some of the settlers were scandalized by the wild ways that possessed her but had to admit that the scant fresh meat they'd eaten so far had been supplied by Kathy and the long rifle she handled as slick as most women do a cup of tea. But she resented Rebecca's intrusion and, not knowing just how to cope with such a situation, she'd gone her lone and strange way. She was content enough after a while to just ride and shoot and absorb this great wild country that was like a heady tonic to her with all its newness and bigness.

So now, at this chancey stage of the westward trip, when they were about to leave the security of the far-flung fort on the flood-swollen Missouri to strike overland through Sioux country to that beckoning land by the sea, here was this man, Ringo, eyeing Rebecca as if she were taffy candy while Adam eyed both of them. As for Kathy, she sat her brown mare, straight and slim and scornful, impatient to be moving on because the confinement and smells of the fort seemed to stifle her. The rifle she'd fashioned a saddle scabbard for, with its hand-carved black walnut stock, rested, polished and easy, at her hand, looking like a lance in the sun.

THAT misty, early summer morning in 1846 when they struck west again, Rebecca, in gingham and bonnet, dangled her bare legs from the high seat where she perched alongside Uncle Christian as they rode through the gates of Fort Union. Her eyes were casual on Ringo, a tempered knife of a man in buckskins and moccasins. He looked more Indian than white, what with his braided hair slapping against his neck, and the rifle, knife and tomahawk that he was never without giving him a wild appearance. He came riding down the strung-out train as it emerged from the fort, his dark eyes alert. Alongside the Martin wagon he reined his spotted horse in and made it rear and looked straight at Rebecca before he brought it down.

His words were directed at Christian, though. "Your wagon's too heavy," he said. "Might be you'll have to shuck some stuff later."

"Might be," said Christian.

Aunt Deborah's head emerged through the canvas slit. "We'll shuck nothing!" she announced. Her face was sharp with indignation. "If the wagon and what's in it don't make it, we don't make it." Christian nodded to his wife's words.

Ringo's cool eyes never wavered. 'Yes, ma'am," he said tonelessly.

He flicked his gaze back to Rebecca. "You'd best ride in another wagon," he said.

Rebecca flushed under his look. "I'll stay with my aunt and uncle," she said. "You lead and we'll follow."

Ringo shook his head. "Not unless you lighten this rig, you won't."

Rebecca's shoulders stiffened. Her blue eyes met his dark ones straight. "We have come this far. We'll go farther. With or without the train. With or without your help, Mr. Ringo."

Her aunt and uncle nodded and Aunt Deborah got a last word in, as she usually did. "And that," she said, "is that!"

Ringo shrugged. "It's your funeral," he said. "I'll do the best I can."

He touched his pony with moccasined heels and rode off, his braided hair jogging. Aunt Deborah sniffed. "Worst than an In-

dian, that one," she said. "Indians don't know no better."

Christian nodded. Rebecca just sat there and watched Ringo ride away.

Up ahead, Ringo reined in where Kathy Gordon capered her brown mare midway between the Gottfeldt wagon and the Martin vehicle.

"You, boy," he said. "What's your name?"

"Gordon," said Kathy. Her voice was low, as it always was.

Ringo's eyes dwelt impersonally on her high-cheekboned face that planed down to a set chin. But in the casual glance he took in the way she sat the mare, the rifle she held tilted, the scabbard for the stock, and the fact that she wore moccasins without beads. His eyes kindled. He had a trail helper in this younker.

"Can you shoot that rifle, sonny?"

"As good as you can. And don't call me sonny!"

He grinned, still taking her for a boy, which wasn't hard to do. "Hair on your chest, eh, Gordon? You ride herd on this shebang. If'n you see any dust, front or rear or where-all, let go with that cannon of your'n." He got out tobacco plug, ripped off a chunk with his teeth, proffered it to the girl. "Chew?"

"No."

Ringo wiped his mouth with the stained sleeve of his hunting shirt. "That blond package in the wagon behind us—she got a name?"

"Rebecca," said Kathy. "Rebecca Martin."

"Rebecca." Ringo rolled the word in his mouth like it was sweet water. "Ain't seen a filly like that ever. Got spunk, too. This is goin' to be a nice trip, I'm thinkin'—barrin' trouble from that wagon she's ridin' in."

Kathy said nothing. She sat straight and silent, her own dark eyes as fathomless as Ringo's. The scout thought fleetingly, This young'un will make a mountain man. Kinda scrawny but young and unsalted. This country makes a man out of a boy in no time. Especiallyy these silent, deep ones who seem to have a perpetual mad on.

"Keep an eye on that Martin wagon," he said. "If it breaks down, as it sure as hell will, we'll shuck some of that load. You larrup that hoss up front and tell me if it does." He gave her a man's wink and a crooked grin. "Wouldn't mind that Rebecca gal ridin' pillion behind me clear to Oregon!"

He and the spotted pony were gone with a lunge. Kathy watched him until he disappeared among the wagons up ahead. She spat, deliberately and unlike a lady, into the dust. "Men," she told her mare, "are all alike."

PRETTY SOON whips began popping up ahead, the sound coming down the wagon line like the crackling of a running brush fire. Oxen settled against yokes. Wheels turned slowly at first and then picked up a lumbering speed. Dust rose and men shouted. The wagon train rattled and lurched down the slope, the fort dwindling behind and the world opening up ahead under a sky so big the sight of it made one catch his breath.

Kathy waited astride her horse, her flat-cheeked face expressionless as she watched her brother, Adam, haw his oxen around, jockeying the great wagon with its sweep of weathered canvas so that he trailed behind the Martin wagon, as he always did. She kneed her horse, drifting out to the side, out of the dust, riding midway between Adams' wagon and the one of the Martins'.

The going was the worst ever. Right away the train began pulling away from the groaning Martin wagon that seemed ready to break its back each time it lurched over a boulder or dipped sickeningly in a rut. They hadn't been three hours out of the fort when the Gottfeldt wagon up ahead had near a quarter-mile lead on the Martin and

Gordon rigs. The break-through wagon of Marcus Rhul was so far off it was just a white-capped speck in the distance. As the sun slowly caught up and passed the sweating men and plodding beasts and swaying wagons, the gap between the eighth wagon and the two stragglers lengthened to half a mile.

Westward, in the shimmery haze that danced atop a ridge, first one wagon crawled to the summit only to disappear like a sinking ship, and then another. And finally the eighth wagon, that of the Gottfeldts', seemed to hang there for an eye-wink and then it was gone, too. The Martin wagon and Adam Gordon's, big as they were, looked like two slow-crawling bugs on the baked vastness of the land.

About then, as both Christian and Rebecca tilted their heads back to watch a slow-sailing hawk drift out of nowhere, the right rear wheel of the wagon climbed a boulder. The wagon slanted.

On the faint warning yell of Adam behind them, the wheel came down with a spine-numbing impact that shuddered through the wagon. There was a sharp cracking sound like a fired log. The wheel seemed to bend so that the wagon lurched and something gave sickeningly. Rebecca clutched at Uncle Christian and let out a little scream. The heavily loaded wagon settled almost slowly, its great weight snapping wheel spokes and tire and axle as if they were kindling wood. Quite suddenly, the wagon was lying there lopsided. The oxen strained once in their yokes, and then just stood motionless.

Adam came alongside in his wagon. "You could have missed that rock," he said in that slow voice of his. "It was as big as a washtub."

Rebecca tossed him an angry look. "You act as if we did it on purpose."

Christian nodded. "Adam's right," he said heavily. "It was my fault. I was sky gazing."

Rebecca wouldn't hush. "I've about had my fill of smart-alecky men for one day," she said. She clambered down from the wagon behind Christian, her eyes avoiding the hurt look on Adam's face. Aunt Deborah emerged from the rear of the wagon as the two men hunkered down by the shattered rear wheel.

"Wheel and axle gone in smithereens and you've a busted brace," Adam said. "It'll be a job. We'll have to unload most of the wagon. The jacks'll never lift that weight."

He turned worried eyes toward the ridge shimmering ahead in the sun. "They'll have cause to grumble now," he said.

Standing behind him, Rebecca said acidly, "Why don't you catch up with them? We'll manage very well."

Adam didn't turn. "You know I'd never do that, Rebecca," he said.

Rebecca met her aunt's critical gaze. She bit her lip and the fury in her died. She felt the sting of tears against her eyes. The bad mood that had gripped her fled in the face of Adam's kind speech. Without thinking, she put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm out of sorts. It was as much my fault as Uncle Christian's. I should have been watching the trail."

Aunt Deborah said, "We're all crotchety. That Ringo heathen and his talk of shucking the piano!"

Adam's head had swung around, an amazed light in his eyes. He didn't say anything. He reached up and hesitantly touched the girl's hand.

Deborah and Christian looked at each other.

Adam stood up. "It won't be so bad," he said with a spring to his voice now. "With that wagon tilted like it is, we'll just roll up the canvas and hoist and slide the piano and other things out. The jacks'll handle it easy, then."

Behind them on her brown mare, Kathy said, "I'll get Ringo." She kicked her moccasined heels and yanked her horse's head

around in a pawing rear. The horse came down running. They watched as horse and rider lit out across the plain toward the ridge and the vanished wagon train beyond. They kicked up a cloud of dust that seemed to travel along just behind the horse's streaming tail.

Aunt Deborah's eyes were calculating on the dust and bobbing back of Kathy. "H-m-m," she said, for no apparent reason. "Things happen for the best. It is God's way."

Neither she nor any of the others there saw the larger cloud of dust that moved toward them from the south.

RINGO just sat his horse and stared. He cursed once. A flat, unemotional curse. Beside him, the brim of her hat low on her eyes, Kathy stared along with Ringo. A grin tugged at her lips but didn't blossom. Ringo squeezed his eyes as a man will who sees a mirage but doesn't believe what his eyes tell him.

Up ahead, where the Martin wagon lay slanted and askew like a broken thing, Aunt Deborah was busily waxing an upright mahogany piano, which gleamed dully in the shade cast by Adam's close-drawn wagon. Almost at her feet, Uncle Christian and Adam sweated as they struggled to lever up the sagging wagon enough to slide a massive jack under it. Rebecca, her back to the two riders, half knelt, half sat, in a short oak pew, watching the two men work. Wooden boxes piled with Bibles and hymn books and other churchly necessities were stacked nigh to the rear wheel hubcap of Adam's wagon.

"I'll be double-damned and dipped in beaver medicine," said Ringo. "Now I've seen everythin'!"

Ringo and Kathy rode up and dismounted. Ringo leaned his rifle and himself against the pew. He said pleasantly, "That a piano, ma'am?"

Aunt Deborah said, "You got eyes, ain't you?"

"I do," said Ringo. "But what they see I can't believe, smack in the middle of Indian country, like we are. Don't tell me this is a church pew?"

"It is a church pew," Aunt Deborah told him. "But how you would know that is more than I can fathom."

"Ma'am," said Ringo, "if one of your menfolk talked like that I'd knock him down." He looked at Adam. "Especially if he told me you were goin' to load that stuff back on the wagon."

The first time Adam had seen Ringo look at Rebecca he knew it would come to this. The piano and stuff didn't mean enough to fight over. It was Rebecca. Adam wiped his hands on his butternut jeans and came forward slowly. "It's a pew," he said. "It's a piano. They both go West. You aim to make something of it?"

Ringo's face never changed. Wordless, he took a deliberate step, and then he struck. Adam went down, his back whopping the ground so that dust spurted out from under his shirt. Rebecca screamed, and then she was on her knees in the dust, her arms around the dazed man.

"You brute!" she cried, turning for a second to Ringo.

Ringo waited, watching the girl dab with a handkerchief at the blood that trickled from the corner of Adam's mouth. Ringo sighed deep in his belly. Adam got a hand under him and came to his feet, his eyes steady, now, on Ringo's face.

Behind Ringo, Kathy said casually, "Indians!" even as the fleeting slim shadow whirred across the sun to bury itself with an ugly thud in the mahogany piano behind Adam. Somewhere near, an Indian let out a keening yell. And as Ringo's eyes slid to the feathered arrow that quivered from the side of the piano, Adam hit him. The blow lifted Ringo off his feet and slammed him against the Martin wagon. His knees buckled and he slid to the ground.

Adam swept Kathy and Rebecca over the pew and into the natural barricade

which was made by the kneeling bench, the piano, the loaded box of Bibles and hymn books and the wagons. And as he bent over and came up with Ringo's dead weight in his arms, there came a sound as though the gates of hell had opened with one sweep. Adam dropped Ringo's limp body behind the piled boxes, and flopped down beside Rebecca, where she crouched behind the kneeling bench.

Aunt Deborah, her face as white as the petticoat that showed as she huddled beneath the keyboard of the piano, winced each time an arrow thudded into the woodwork of the instrument. "Oh! Those godless critters," she said. "Just let me get my hands on one; I'll scalp him alive!"

Beside her, Christian said dully, "My rifle's in the wagon. So's Adam's. I don't think you'll be playing any more hymns on the piano, Debby."

Flat on her stomach behind the boxes, her rifle nestled between a Bible and a hymn book, Kathy took a careful bead on a close-riding Indian who wore little else but paint. The rifle cracked. The Indian's war cry was cut off abruptly. Kathy reloaded. On his back at her side, Ringo snored softly.

Adam knelt at the church pew, Ringo's gun in his hands. Indians were out front, wheeling in and out on their small ponies. They were after the oxen, Adam reckoned. The great beasts stood there stolidly, watching the dusty swirling motion of Indians and horses with stupid eyes. Adam fired. An Indian flopped from his pony, got up and weaved, bent over backward into the dust.

Rebecca lay on her side, her eyes, big but without fright, on the calm face of Adam. "I guess I'll not be riding on the high seat of your wagon after all," she said.

Adam looked down at her. "Hush now," he said. "Marcus Rhul and the rest are just over that ridge. They'll hear this. They'll come."

Rebecca shook her head. She put her hand on Adam's. "Not in time," she said quietly. "You know that. Oh, Adam!" She began to cry softly.

Alongside Kathy, Ringo's breath caught on a snore. He opened his eyes and experimented with his jaw, first with his tongue, then with a hand. He looked at Kathy, who was intent on her rifle, and what was going on outside the barricade. His eyes traveled from the piano to the church pew to the boxes of Bibles and hymn books beside him. He saw that they had only two guns. He began to swear. He swore softly but steadily. When he was through, Kathy's rifle spoke.

"Amen," she said, reloading.

Ringo grinned and winced. "You're quite a boy," he said. "You'd made quite a man. Too bad you gotta lose your hair so young." He sat up cautiously. "Who lugged me in here?"

She told him. Then, "Ringo."

"Yeah?"

"We haven't a chance, have we?"

He grinned cheerfully. "Nary a one, sonny. Them Sioux know by now we only got two guns. They're havin' fun out there. They'll frolic until they figger our powder's gone."

Kathy sighed.

"We could have had a lot of fun, too," she said. "You and me."

Something in her voice got to him. He gave her a quick, puzzled look. "What in hell you talkin' about?"

She yanked off her hat and shook her head so that her black hair came tumbling down. "You damn fool!" she said bitterly.

Ringo was staring at her with his mouth open when the piano came alive with the triumphant music of a hymn.

IN ALL her years as church pianist in the Palatin Church back in German Flats, Aunt Deborah had never performed before a more rapt audience. One moment it had been all sound and fury and dusty

motion out there. Then Aunt Deborah had reared up at the piano, her chin set and her eyes blazing. She'd plumped herself down on a box at the arrow-bristling piano and began laying her hands heavily enough on the keys and on her feet firmly enough on the pedals so that the music rolled out in a thundering burst of hymn music that fair made the protruding arrows shake. In fact, a couple that weren't stuck too deep in the wood loosened and fell right out.

To a pack of Indians who'd never heard anything much except the beat of war and signal drums the crash and roll of piano music seemed to pin them where they were. The yipping trailed off first. Then the pound of pony hoofs subsided and finally died out entirely along with the twanging of bows. All those painted Indians sat, surprised, out there in the settling dust, listening to a music they'd never heard before as played with passionate vigor by a sharp-faced woman in gingham and sunbonnet.

As Aunt Deborah's fingers loosened up, she interpolated a few trills and musical doodads she used to delight the Sunday school class with, and Ringo swore later he could see the shaved heads of the Indians ripple. Slowly, stepping their ponies carefully, the Indians all collected in a bunch and then proceeded to sit there like gargoyles as they listened to hymn music that had come down through the ages. Then Uncle Christian, his hand on his wife's shoulder, began singing in that booming voice of his. But when Aunt Deborah chimed in with her soprano voice, the Indians remained sitting motionless, like a pack of stunned devils.

Ringo said thickly, "They either think we're crazier than get-out or the music's just got 'em plumb buffaloed. Let's get that wagon jacked up and a wheel on. And tell Missus Martin to play like hell!"

The Indians paid no attention to the three men as they sweated over the jacks. Aunt Deborah went on playing hymn after hymn, her hands seeming to gather strength as she played, so that the music crashed out in a continual wave of sound. Rebecca and Kathy moved up to the piano and added their voices to Aunt Deborah's, and every once in a while Uncle

Rainbow Trail

By Pauline Booker

Each trail I took was lonely,
And none could satisfy;
I rode without a song,
Beneath a dreary sky.

But now my way is bright
With joy's most radiant gleams,
And all my days are filled
With wondrous, thrilling dreams.

I know at last a love
That's tender, sweet and true;
For, dear, one day I found
The trail that led to you!

Christian and Adam would join in lustily as they worked. Ringo just worked; he didn't know any hymns.

They'd just about got the wheel on when Kathy called out, "Ringo!"

The scout came around, his rifle ready. An Indian with an eagle feather in his hair was coming toward them, stepping his horse gravely, as if he were on parade. Ringo gave him a quick look. "He's left his weapons behind," he said, puzzled. "He comes in peace." He lowered his rifle and waited. Unmindful of what was going on, Aunt Deborah went on playing.

The Indian moved his horse toward the piano, holding its head tight. He loomed suddenly above the piano. Aunt Deborah looked up and straight into that painted savage face. She paled and missed beat and came down on a couple of off-key chords, hideously, right in the middle of the hymn she was playing. But it seemed to be just what the Indian wanted to hear, because he gave a couple of satisfied grunts and then leaned over and laid something on top of the upright piano.

Ringo said as though he didn't believe it, "Gifts! A couple of Blackfeet scalps, and a Sioux'd rather part with his hide than a Blackfoot scalp. They must figger Missus Martin's medicine's too strong to fight, or somethin'."

Aunt Deborah looked furious, and almost stopped playing. "That's God's medicine, young man!" she snapped. But she went on playing louder than ever, and there was a sort of prim satisfaction to the set of her face that betrayed that she was some pleased.

She said something to Rebecca, and the girl flew over to the boxes. She came back with an armful of Bibles and hymn books. Timidly, she gave them to the Indian, and he took the books one by one, stacking them on a brown arm. Then he backed his pony up, turned and jogged back.

Adam said, "The wheel's bolted firmly."

Ringo said, "We'll sit tight. Here comes Marcus Rhul."

And that's the way it was when Marcus Rhul and the rest of the men finally arrived, armed to the teeth but not exactly spoiling for a fight if they didn't have to. As they moved up the Indians moved out without a sound and the way they sat their ponies, it wasn't hard to tell they were listening with all their might to the hymn music Aunt Deborah beat out of that piano as they drifted south.

LATER, when all the excitement had died down, Ringo supervised the careful loading of the arrow-scarred piano in the Martin wagon. He wouldn't even listen when Marcus Rhul argued that if Ringo insisted they lug the piano West, they ought to shuck the oak church pew and other stuff. Ringo saw to it personally that the kneeling bench and boxes of Bibles and hymn books were distributed in other wagons, much to Aunt Deborah's gimlet-eyed satisfaction. Then Ringo on his spotted horse and Kathy on her brown mare led the wagons and mounted men toward the camp the settlers had pitched beyond the ridge.

Behind them, shoulder to shoulder on the high seat of their wagon, Aunt Deborah and Uncle Christian watched Ringo and Kathy jogging along stirrup to stirrup.

"A pair of wild ones," observed Christian.

"Wild as hawks," said Deborah. "But made for each other. Christian, where's Rebecca?"

"She's riding the seat with Adam," Christian said.

"Oh?" Deborah's voice had lost its sharpness in the dusk. Her hand sought for and found her husband's. "God is good, Christian," she said. "I wonder if He'd mind if I decided to keep those scalps." ♥ ♥ ♥

SEASONAL SALLY

Sal's sittin' pretty in the campfire's glow,

You can find her here 'most any night.

The campfire's warm, but the hombres all know—

It's warmer when she puts out the light!

1954			JUNE			1954
SUN.	MON.	TUES.	WED.	THUR.	FRI.	SAT.
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

1954			JULY			1954
SUN.	MON.	TUES.	WED.	THUR.	FRI.	SAT.
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

HEARTBREAK RENDEZVOUS

Would he leave her with only the bittersweet memory of a love that was barred by his past?

ISABEL STEWART WAY

THE TRAIN had just come into Rawhide, when Mahala stepped out on the roofed board sidewalk before the general store. She paused, basket on arm, while her eyes went in mild curiosity to the caboose that tailed the long string of freight cars. Her gaze widened, unbelievingly, at sight of the man who stepped down to the platform and started up the street.

Young, he was—Mahala could tell that by his carriage—but no young man she had ever seen was garbed like this stranger. Striped broadcloth trousers were tucked fastidiously into highly polished, elaborately stitched boots. His long, frock-tailed coat was opened in front to show a ruffled shirt above a plaid vest, with shining gold nugget butons; a watch chain, also of nuggets, was draped across the vest. And, sitting jauntily upon his fair curly hair, was a hat, the like of which Mahala had never glimpsed before. It was a tall hat of beaver, and it shone like satin under the bright morning sun.

Mahala's red lips parted in a smile of amusement as she watched him come swinging up the dusty street. But the smile faded, and terror filled her blue eyes, as two men came out of the saloon across the way, stopped and stared at the newcomer.

"It ain't true!" one said. "Can't be!"

"Yep, it's true," the other announced. "An' here's where I make back that five dollars I lost to you last month. Here's five that says I can plug this one, when he comes even with the feed store down there."

"Take you!"

Mahala gave a little cry. She knew the men—Will'm Howard and Chuck Reddinger—and she knew about the bet that had been made, and lost, last month. Another stranger had come to town, a tenderfoot, with a ridiculous hat. Chuck had bet Will'm that he could put a bullet through the headgear at fifty yards. He had tried—and the stranger had dropped dead.

Chuck's only comment had been, "Hell, I aimed too low!" as he paid over the five. And since nobody knew the victim, and everyone was a litle afraid of Chuck, they had said Chuck shot in self-defense. And now—they were going to try it again!

The stranger suddenly headed across the street, toward the two waiting men. In another moment, he would be even with the feed store. With a cry, Mahala ran out into the dust, toward him.

"Wait!" she cried breathlessly. "Wait!"

He turned, took a step toward her, just as Chuck's sixgun barked.

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"Darlin', sweet, you're cryin', on account of me!"

THE bullet fanned the newcomer's cheek. Then, so quickly that Mahala's eye couldn't follow the gesture, the man whirled, and a gun appeared in his hand. It spoke, filling the air about Mahala with acrid smoke-stench . . . . And across the way, Chuck gave a vile curse, as his gun clattered to the sidewalk.

For a moment the stranger stood there, gun still drawn, looking at the other two. Mahala dropped her basket. Her heart had stopped beating at the look in those gray eyes.

Dark gray and large, they were, deep-set in a lean, smooth face. Right now, they were hard and cold—a killer's eyes. Mahala saw, too, the two gun-belts, worn crossed over his hips, beneath the long coat. The holsters were strapped to lean thighs, and the handle of the second gun, that protruded from its strapped down holster, was palm-polished to smoothness.

Across the street, Will'm spoke. "Put up your gun, stranger," he said placatingly. "Chuck'n me was just havin' a little joke. No harm intended. Was there, Chuck?"

"No!" Chuck scowled, and hot anger smoldered in his small, beady black eyes. "Wouldn't have touched you!"

"I don't like your jokes," the man said, his deliberate cold tone ill-fitted to the tenderfoot garb. "But since there's a lady here"—he holstered his gun—"we'll let the matter rest . . . for now."

There was a tense silence over the crowd that had gathered out on the sidewalks. Eyes went from the frock-tailed man in the street to the big-hulked Chuck, who was nursing a numbed arm.

Mahala watched anxiously. Chuck was a bad one; since he had come to Rawhide, two years ago, he had aspired to be the cowtown bully—and had succeeded. Folks kept out of his way; all but Will'm, who followed him about, a slavish crony.

Chuck shrugged. "A feller that can't take a joke," he said loudly, "sooner or later gits the butt-end of one, an' likes it, or else he takes the front end of a gun! Reckon it's for you to choose, Mister Plug Hat!"

With a cool unconcern that was a greater insult than a drawn gun, the stranger turned to Mahala, took off the offending hat, and bowed. He smiled, too, and all the terror-chill around her heart melted away under the warmth of that smile. And his eyes! When they looked into hers, they were no longer steely gray; they were smoky, like the smoke and flames of distant range fires.

"Thanks, miss," he said. "If you hadn't spoken and made me turn, I reckon that bullet would have gone too low. And your packages—" Heedless of the trim trousers and polished boots, he knelt in the dust, and began collecting the bundles that had spilled out.

When he had gathered them up, he took the basket on his arm, looked down into her flushed, lovely face, with its wreathing nimbus of coal-black hair.

"Now, if you'll allow me to tote this basket home for you. . . . "

"Oh, thanks, but never mind," she began confusedly. "I—it's way out beyond the schoolhouse. It's quite a long walk—"

"All the more reason why you shouldn't be goin' alone," he said. Then, looking around and seeing the small unpainted schoolhouse that stood at the far end of the single street, he took her arm gallantly, and with gentle decision started her that way.

FOR a moment Mahala was conscious of the eyes focused upon her, as they walked down the board sidewalk—but only for a moment. After that, she was aware only of the man beside her; of the lights in his eyes, of the fair hair that curled crisply back from his lean-jawed face.

"Reckon I'd better introduce myself," he said, as they went past the vacant commons that separated the school from the saloons, honkytonks, gambling dens and other buildings. "I'm Kort Bradley, from

down Panhandle way. I know I don't look much like a Texican," he drawled on, "but there's where I was born and raised—till late years."

"I'm Mahala Eason," she told him. "I live with my father, the schoolteacher. I'm sorry your welcome to Rawhide was so harsh."

"My welcome anywhere is usually harsh." He laughed. "But I'm always prepared."

Suddenly she felt an anger toward this man, who deliberately invited trouble, who had frightened her so, there in the street. All at once she could bear it no longer, and she stopped in the path—leading down through a little gully that cut behind the town—and faced him.

"Why do you go about this way?" she demanded. "Dressed like this, when you know it'll make trouble? Do you think it's clever to be different from other men? Do you think—"

"I think you're right pretty when you're upset." He smiled into her eyes. "The most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on, since my mother died. You *are* sweet, Mahala!" He set the basket down, put his hands upon her shoulders. "You're so terribly sweet, I. . . . "

His head bent lower—lower—until it seemed to Mahala she could see the soul behind his smoky eyes. It dizzied her. She swayed a little, felt Kort Braley's arms about her, steadying her, drawing her dark head against his ruffled shirt front, his big hand stroking her hair tenderly.

The dizziness left, but there remained the sense of unreality, of blessed comfort. She didn't want to move, didn't want to let herself remember that this was wrong, that she should jerk herself from his embrace and run home. All she wanted to do was to listen to his low voice, to feel his cheek laid gently against her own.

"Mahala! Mahala!" he whispered, over and over. "Darlin', you're so sweet." Then, tensely, "Kiss me, Mahala."

Obediently, she lifted her lips to him, and at that fiery touch, every vestige of unease fled. She clung to him dizzily, intoxicated in the sweet, warm wonder of her first man-kisses. She was enveloped in a golden maze of joyousness. She was aflame with awakening womanhood.

At last his arms dropped, released her. One hand came up to lift her chin, while he looked deeply into her glowing eyes.

"Mahala!" he whispered hoarsely. "I've no right! But I've got to see you again, darlin', got to tell you—"

A woman's voice sounded up the trail, beyond the gully's arm. It was Aunt Lindy Howard, Will'm's mother, who had the sharpest tongue in all Rawhide. It would never do, Mahala realized, for the old woman to come upon Kort and herself together here.

"Come to the house tonight, Kort," she said breathlessly. "It's the house beyond the gully. I'll be waiting under the cottonwood tree by the gate—when the moon comes up. We'll have a few minutes together, before we tell dad. Only"—a little anxiously—"please leave off your guns. Dad doesn't believe in them."

With cheeks flushed scarlet at her own boldness, she stood on tiptoe, pressed a quick kiss upon his lips. Then she caught up the basket, and ran up the trail, to keep Aunt Lindy busy in conversation while Kort made his way out of sight.

ALL day Mahala sang as she worked about the neat cabin. Because she had to work off the surge of feeling that possessed her, she scrubbed and scoured, baked and brewed, until all was in readiness, as if for a feast.

When her tired father came home, she was especially tender, to cover the guilty feeling she had. It didn't seem right to share her glorious secret with a stranger, and leave her father out.

A stranger! Mahala laughed aloud at the idea of Kort being a stranger. Even if

she'd never met him until this morning, she knew him well now. She had been held in his arms, had listened to his heart pounding in a tumultuous beat, with her head laid against his breast. She had known the flaming joyousness of his lips against hers.

"Why do you laugh, child?" her father asked.

He was a thin, frail man. He was not much past forty, but his shoulders were stooped. His blue eyes—so much like Mahala's—burned in deep sockets under a wealth of snow-white hair.

A gentle man was Mahlon Eason. He abhorred guns and fighting. It was some inner strength that made him respected in a community that looked up to naught but sixgun law.

"Why do you laugh?" he repeated.

She hugged him, as she stopped during her errands from stove to table. "I'll tell you later!" she promised.

After supper, her father took his books and went into the lean-to that was his own domain. He would still be awake, Mahala knew, when she and Kort came to tell their news, for, late into each night, the coal-oil lamp in the lean-to sent out a faint rim of glow around the door.

Mahala dressed, brushing out her dark hair until it shone, slipping on her long, ruffled blue dimity, with its wide leg-o'-mutton sleeves and black velvet ribbons. It was her best frock.

The moon was only a faint glow behind the high black hills when she went out to the cottonwood—lovely now with its faint green leaves and drifting, cottony blossoms. . . . The moon rose in its arc across the night, covering the world with red glow. It climbed until it was a cold small lantern in the high dome of the sky. And at last Mahala crept away, heartsick, past her father's door and into the front room, where her own bed stood in a curtained alcove. Kort had not come.

Once there, Mahala gave way to the grief that held her. Sobs shook her. Scalding tears stung her eyes. And, deep in her heart, there burned a pain so great she knew she could never lose the scar of it.

She had given her kisses to a stranger. He had taken them, and walked away. He had carried away with him—her heart. For she loved him, would always love him, from now until time was no more.

* * *

The weeping stopped after a time, leaving grief, like a dull, frozen weight, where her heart had been. Mutely, next day, Mahala went about her tasks. She kept away from town, from the sight of people. But in spite of herself, that night she went to the cottonwood, watching for the sight of an outlandish plug hat to come up from the gully-dip, listening for the sound of a step that had grown familiar in the single hour she had known it.

Once, on the third night, she thought she heard him coming. Her hands grasped the gate until they were white-knuckled. Her eyes were wide and dark, as she stared down the trail.

It was only Will'm Howard, on his way to town. Mahala shrank back, but he had seen her. Drawing up his horse, he threw a leg over the saddlehorn, sat there at ease.

" 'Lo, Mahala," he greeted. "That friend of yours, the tenderfoot that brung you home that day, is cuttin' quite a swath down town, ain't he?"

There was a tight lump in Mahala's throat, but she made her voice come past it. "I suppose that's why you don't like him, you and Chuck Reddington," she said dryly. "Chuck always aspired to be the big bad man in Rawhide."

"You bet we don't like him!" Will'm said viciously. None too bright was Will'm; his twisted brain only echoed the hatreds of the strong Chuck Reddington. "An' wait till this night's over! Chuck's been away these last couple days, an' he's heard

things." He grinned, showing yellow fangs, as he started his horse on.

Mahala stared after Will'm, trying to comprehend what he meant. And then she heard Will'm's voice greet another, sulkily, down in the gully-dip. She heard the other voice reply . . . and she forgot to wonder. It was Kort's voice! Before she could breathe again, he was riding out of the gully . . . . Then he had dismounted, was walking through the gate and toward the cottonwoods, where she waited in trembling, poignant tension.

"Mahala!" His tones were hoarse as he saw her. "Mahala!"

"Kort!" It was only a small cry, as she stumbled toward him, straight into the arms opened to receive her.

Tears spilled out as she clung to him, running her hand over his face to be sure he was real, flinging her arms about his neck, as his own embrace tightened.

"Darlin', sweet, you're cryin'!" he said, low and kissed away the tears. "Cryin', on account of me!"

"It doesn't matter," she said. It was true. Nothing mattered now but the joy of his nearness, the ecstatic bliss of feeling his arms about her, his lips upon her hair, her cheeks, her quivering, expectant mouth.

"Don't, Mahala!" Kort's hoarse tones made her lift her head, frightened at she knew not what. "Don't! I stayed away because I knew I would weaken if I came. But I had to be fair, had to tell you the truth."

His arms were away from her now. The lights had died from his eyes, leaving them bleak and cold, under the faint moonlight.

"Oh, Kort!" Hers was a cry of terror. Whatever he had to tell, she didn't want to hear! She only wanted to be in his arms. She took a step toward him, but he moved backward.

"Mahala, I'm not fit to touch the lips of a girl like you. I'm a killer. I'm the worst killer, I reckon, still left alive on the range. Here, feel along this!"

He pulled a gun from under his long coat. With a quick motion, he reversed it, handed the butt-end to her.

Slowly, she let her thumb run over one notch after another, carved neatly into the hard wood. At first she started counting them, mechanically. She stopped. There were so heartbreakingly many.

"I'm the Monte Kid," he said dully.

Her nerveless fingers let the gun drop with a soft thud into the dust.

"The Monte Kid!" she echoed. "You make a profession of killing. You glory in your reputation. You—"

"Mahala, I don't want to be a killer!" He reached for her again, and she drew away. "They've forced me to go on, to protect myself. From the time I hunted down the skunk who had bushwhacked my father, I've had to wear guns—and use them. Some men have stood up to me, looking for vengeance. Some have been looking for glory. And I—"

"I can't listen!" she choked, drawing back from him. To her stricken gaze, his hands looked blood-red. "You carry two guns, and you do everything to provoke the chance to kill! Even the clothes you wear . . . Oh!" Her desperation rose to hysterical frenzy. "I hate you! I hate all killers! Go away from me—and never come back!"

"I won't come back, Mahala." His voice sounded tired, and very, very old, as he swung quickly to the saddle.

For a short instant he was a dark statue silhouetted against the night sky, and then he was gone. Only the thudding beat of his horse's hoofs came back to her . . . like the beat of funeral drums.

TONIGHT, the sobs couldn't be checked. As she crept through the kitchen, the lean-to door was flung open, and Mahala's father stood there, gaunt and pale.

"What is it, dear?" he asked, and she could not resist the command. Anyway, her sorrow was too great to be longer penned up.

"Father!" she choked. "There's a man I love! I loved him from the first moment I saw him. But now—I've got to hate him!"

"Who is he? And why must you hate him? Has he done anything—" He caught her arm, and his face was a mask of fury.

"No!" she gasped. "Nothing like that! It's just—he's the Monte Kid. He's a killer—and I hate him!" And the whole tale spilled forth in a rush of words.

"Come in here, Mahala," her father said, when she was through.

She followed him into the lean-to, sank into a chair, sobs tightening her throat. Her father was kneeling before the tin trunk that had been her mother's. As she watched dully, he hauled up a pair of gun-belts from its depths, tossed them upon the floor.

"Those were my guns," he said. "I was a killer, once."

"Father!" she cried in disbelief.

"Yes, I was a killer," he repeated, raising his haggard face to look at her. "Mahala, no man is a killer from choice, unless it's a rowdy who wants to be a showoff. But the other kind, like the Monte Kid, you've got to know how it is. I—I was only sixteen when I killed my first man."

The only sound was Mahala's quick, indrawn breath, as she huddled back in the chair, her dark hair a frame about her white, wide-eyed face.

"I was a waif," Mahlon Eason went on, "but old Jim Tolliver raised me like a son. I loved him the way a homeless boy can love the man who is kind. When I was fifteen, I saw him shot down by a man he caught blotching brands. And Big Jim was unarmed. I was such a kid that Blacky Yates let me go.

"I had to get him," he went on. "So when I heard that Blacky was down near the border, I saddled up and started out—with Big Jim's two guns weighting me down. I found Blacky. And I was quicker on the draw. So I killed him, and paid Big Jim's debt."

"It was all you could do," Mahala whispered. "But after that—"

"I had to go on killing. Blacky's partner caught me just outside the saloon, where I'd got Blacky. He drew, never meaning to give me a chance, but I was lucky. A third one of the gang followed me down to the livery stable, tried to get me from the shadows, but a stable-hand warned me, so I was ready. Three men in one day—and from then on, I was a killer." He sighed. "I had no chance. They made me go on."

"They made you go on?" she whispered. "That's what Kort said."

"A killer is branded, and no man offers him mercy or justice. Sooner or later, word drifts in of what he is, and then he must kill quickly, or be killed—especially if the word is brought by some small buckaroo who wants the glory of ending the killer's career. Every man's hand is against him."

"But, Father!" Mahala stood up, her eyes dark with anxiety. "You stopped being a killer."

"I ran away," he told her. "Your mother knew, and we always lived in fear of the day when somebody might find who I was, try to force me to the draw, to get the glory of ending me. Finally, I left off my guns, promising your mother I'd never take another life."

Mahala picked up the guns, backed from the room. "I'm going to keep these!" she said tensely, her blue eyes wide.

"I'd like that, Mahala. While your mother lived, she always kept them oiled and loaded," he said with a wistful smile, "against the day she might have to bring them to me." Then, gravely, "Don't hate the Monte Kid, Mahala. I knew his father. Kort started killing, after Big Kort was dry-gulched over a water hole."

Mahala ran into the front room, threw the guns upon her bed, while she tore off her long, full-skirted dress with frantic hands, and put on her riding clothes. Then, around her slender waist, she buckled the

gun-belts. When she took up the guns to examine them, she saw notches in their butts, and gave a shuddering sigh.

Before morning, there would be a new notch there. For Mahala was going to find Chuck Reddinger and kill him, before he had a chance to tell who Kort Braley was.

Will'm Howard, she didn't consider. Without Chuck, he would be a harmless coward.

KORT'S horse was hitched before the Pay Dirt Saloon, the gaudiest, busiest place in town. An oak tree cast its shadow over the hitchrack, and there Mahala waited, hand upon gun—a frozen statue of desperate determination.

They came at last—Will'm Howard and the swarthy, sullen Chuck Reddinger. Mahala could hear their low-voiced plans, as they sat for a moment in the saddle.

"Don't give him a chance to draw," Will'm urged. "Just say, 'Hello, Monte Kid!' and let him have it. Everyone'll duck, soon as you say who he is, and we'll swear he drawed on you!"

"I'm shootin' from the holster 'thout drawin'," Chuck said. Then, "Let's go 'crost the street and get another drink. Braley'll be there for hours."

They aired their saddles, crossed the dusty street, going after fresh courage. Mahala stared after them, then down at the gun in her shaking hands. She had tried to speak to them, to get her chance at killing Chuck. But her voice had died in her throat. The gun had been too heavy to lift. And now she was spared her grim task for a moment.

A burst of loud merriment came from inside. Kort's laugh was clearer than all the others. She had failed Kort . . . and soon Chuck and Will'm would be back to stop that laugh forever. She couldn't prevent them. Not with bullets, anyhow. She couldn't kill, not even for Kort.

Her frantic eyes went to the batwing doors of the Pay Dirt. Behind those doors no woman had ever gone.

Gathering all her desperate courage, she ran across the board sidewalk, pushed open the swinging doors.

There was a gasp, then utter silence. Men froze, glasses in their hands. The bartender stopped in the act of wiping off the bar, and stared at her. Only Kort moved.

"Mahala!" he cried, and started toward her.

She ran across the sawdust to meet him, caught his hand and pulled him around, until the two of them were backed against

Western Wheedle

Don't you want to
Hear a name
Sweet as golden
Honey flame—

Hear how halos
Running wild
Mingle sunshine
In his smile—

And how echoes,
Bugle swept,
Make a heaven
With his step?

Come on, cowboy,
Course you do. . . .
Anyone can see
It's you.

—Drew Gale

the bar, facing the others—and facing the door through which, any minute, Chuck and Will'm might come on their vicious errand.

"Mahala!" Kort's grasp tightened on hers.

"Wait!" The warm touch of his hand gave her strength. She turned to the others, spoke clearly. "Listen! I've come here to tell you—that Kort is the Monte Kid!" She went on clearly, through the stir of astonishment that swept over the place. "He's a killer—but he doesn't want to go on being one. But Chuck Reddinger and Will'm Howard won't let him stop. They're coming now to tell you who he is . . . and then Chuck means to kill him, so he can have the glory of ending the Monte Kid. He won't give Kort a chance! It's like that with a killer," she gasped, her voice a sudden pain in her throat. "When the word comes who he is, then he has to shoot—or be shot. Every man's hand is against him."

She stopped, and the crowd grew rigid. As one man, they turned toward the door. They backed away from Kort and the girl.

For, into the silence of the room, came the voice of Chuck Reddinger, outside. "Get along here, Will'm. I ain't goin' to let yuh sneak off like a crawlin, yellow—"

"Mahala!"

It was Kort, gazing deeply into her eyes, while his hands worked at the buckles on his gunbelts. Loosened, he drew them off with a quick gesture, threw them onto the sawdust-covered floor.

"Darlin', I'll never use them again. I promise you that."

Heedless of the others, he took her in his arms and kissed her. A quick kiss, it was—born of love, bred in danger—but it burned deeply into Mahala's heart, to stay there forever. It might be a kiss of farewell, she knew.

Then Kort pushed her gently from him, strode out into the room and stood waiting, his empty hands well away from his sides. And, finally, the door opened, and Chuck and Will'm came in.

For an instant, the two stared at the tense, waiting group. Then Chuck opened his yellow-fanged mouth. "Hello, Monte Kid!"

And the end of his tipped-up holster spat an orange flame of death—toward Kort.

The bullet crashed the big mirror above the bar, for Kort had leaped aside. Then he leaped again, straight toward Chuck. His hurtling body struck Chuck before the second shot was fired—and that second bullet buried itself in the ceiling.

After that, there were no more shots. Kort had Chuck's guns, threw them to the floor beside his own. Other hands disarmed the cringing Will'm. . . . The fight was definitely over.

*

A GRIZZLED cowman picked up Kort's belts, dusted them off, and handed them to Mahala. "I reckon you can trust him to wear 'em," he told her. "There ain't a one of us but'll fight for his right to wear 'em honest-like."

Then Mahala and Kort were walking home, under the starlight, with the four discarded gun-belts—her father's and Kort's—dangling from the saddlehorn of the horse Kort led.

"Darlin'!" His arm was about her. "I thought there was no escape from it. I even wore these dude clothes, tryin' to lose the Monte Kid. I thought nobody would look for a killer in such duds. But it wasn't any use. It took love, darlin' sweet!" There was a trace of tears in his gray eyes. "It took your love—to break the chain that bound me, Mahala precious."

He stopped. His arms went about her, drew her close. His lips fell upon her own, burning away all bitterness, all ugly memory. And Mahala knew, all at once, that had the saloon fight been settled in another way—had Chuck made Kort kill him—she still would have had to go with Kort . . . and be a killer's mate. ♥ ♥ ♥

By DAVID CREWE

For all his size, he was very gentle.

LOVELY LITTLE REBEL

When Susan tried to promote brotherly love on the range-land, she got all mixed up with some love that wasn't sisterly.

SUSAN GARDNER pushed the pan of potatoes to the back of the stove and went to answer the door. It would be a patient, of course. She wished her father had chosen any profession except that of a doctor. Perhaps in a big city it would have been different, but a doctor in La Mesa must know more than how to cure a stomachache, deliver babies and sit with pneumonia patients through their crisis. He must also be able to set the leg of a steer or a pony or a dog. He must

be an expert in compounding drugs too, for there was no drug store for five hundred miles in any direction. More than any other skill, however, a doctor in La Mesa had to understand the art of plugging bullet holes in men.

That was why Susan regarded the two men on the porch with open anger. That was why her gray eyes were cold.

Both were comparatively young—not more than twenty-four or five. One was quite tall, well bronzed by a Texas sun, and his was the kind of a face which should have been smiling. He was much too worried for that just now for he supported his companion who barely retained consciousness. His right shoulder was one big smear of blood that kept getting bigger.

The other man said, "Is the doctor in, ma'am? My friend here has got a powerful bad shoulder."

"Is that from a bullet?" Susan asked crisply.

"Reckon so. Wasn't his fault. We're strangers here and this ringy cuss in one of the saloons—well, he just hauled out his sixgun and started shooting. My friend got hit and he needs a doctor bad."

Susan said, "My father is Doctor Gardner. He happens to be out on a call, but there isn't any use of your waiting around because he won't treat any more bullet wounds."

The tall man said, "Sure enough? He fixing to retire or something?"

"My father has no intentions of retiring. There has been too much shooting and killing in this town. My father is doing his part to stop it. Unless there's an accident, he refuses to treat any more bullet wounds."

"But my *compadre* is liable to die."

"I'm sorry for him—but he shouldn't get into a gun fight. Good afternoon."

The tall stranger's foot held the door open. "Your pa—he's a doctor, ain't he? Don't doctors take some kind of an oath to treat folks no matter how they happen to get sick or hurt?"

"That's true," Susan said. "But the situation in La Mesa isn't like anywhere else. It's the only town for miles around and every crazy gun-slinging galoot comes riding in looking for trouble. Some of our women and children have been hit by stray bullets. We women held a meeting and we asked my father to stop treating bullet wounds in the hopes that might make these fools come to their senses."

"You think that one up?" he asked bluntly.

"No, I didn't, but I approve. Will you please let me close the door?"

"My name is Bill Jordan, ma'am. I just thought you'd like to know in case we meet again, which I hope we never do. I'm keeping my partner here until your pa arrives. If he turns us away, we'll go peaceable, but he's got to do it personal."

"Do whatever you wish," Susan said curtly. He let her close the door this time and she went back to the kitchen. She tried to concentrate on supper, but it was difficut. Once she went to the parlor and looked out of the window. The two men sat on the steps, smoking cigarettes. She returned to the kitchen and in a few moments she heard the injured man moan.

She gave an annoyed shrug, wiped her hands on the apron again and hurried into her father's office. She took a sterile pad, scissors, some bandage and a bottle of antiseptic and went out to the porch. Without a word she sat down and cut away the wounded man's shirt. The wound was ugly, but no bones seemed to be broken and the slug had gone all the way through. She applied the antiseptic, affixed the pads and expertly put on the bandage.

"There," she said, "that will have to do. Take him to the hotel and put him to bed. He'll be all right in a couple of days."

The wounded man said, "Thank you, ma'am."

"Save your thanks, Tom," Bill Jordan

said. "She was just scared you'd die on the front porch so everybody could see. I'll bet her pa would help us fine if she didn't stand in his way. A doctor don't choose his patients, but I reckon a dumb gal like her wouldn't realize that."

Susan slammed the door hard, but she went to the window and watched them walk slowly away. Just beyond the gate they met her father, recognized him by his medicine satchel. She saw her father shake his head stubbornly, talk some more and finally leave the pair. Susan half wished he hadn't. They seemed like nice young men, especially Bill Jordan, whose concern for his friend she approved of. But she was part of the plan to stop indiscriminate shooting in La Mesa and she had to be firm about it.

Her father put down his satchel wearily, hung up his hat and his Prince Albert coat. He was an even fifty; he'd been a doctor for many years and he was just a bit tired.

Susan said, "I did what I could for that wounded man you talked to, Pa. It wasn't a bad hurt."

Doc shook his head. "I declare, I don't know, Susan. This idea sounded fine at first when you women folk suggested it. No more bullet wounds treated. Any man gets shot, he can die. It stopped some of the shooting, all right."

"I knew it would," Susan said.

"But they're back at it again," he said. "Man gets ringy and riled, he don't stop to think he won't get the bullet cut out of his carcass if his luck runs out. He figures it's the other man who'll need the doctor, and if he don't get attention, that's just too bad."

"It will work if we give it a chance," she argued.

"We?" he asked. "I'm the only doctor. Now take that young fellow who just left here. Name's Tom Andrews. I heard about him last week. He's looking for a place to settle down. He's a danged good man, an asset to any town. Then what happens? Four of Pete Dawes' gunfighters were in town, drunk and disorderly. They scared the daylights out of Marshal Bentley. Tom—he horned in. He never had a chance. They plugged him—and under the agreement I made, I can't take care of his wound. That wasn't his fault."

"We can't spell out any difference," Susan insisted. "If there are no exceptions, the idea will work. It has to—or La Mesa won't last long."

"I know." Doc wagged his shaggy head. "I've thought about it until I'm sore in the head. What's for supper?"

"Ham," she said. "Real nice, too. Pa—who was the man with Tom Andrews?"

"Him? Likely looking young man. Bought him the old Robinson place and he's fixing to start a ranch. He'll do well too."

Susan slid the thick slab of ham onto a platter. "I suppose he'll just move in with his wife and family."

Doc said, "Wife? Reckon not—he ain't married."

THAT evening Susan put on a light dress, her best hat and gloves, and took a walk down past the hotel. She rarely did this and she half wondered why she was doing it now. She derided the idea that she wanted to see Bill Jordan again. After all, he meant nothing to her and when they parted at their first meeting, he hadn't been complimentary. Still, she did register a mild amount of disappointment when she didn't see him.

The next day she saddled up her chestnut mare and rode out toward the Robinson place. She knew she looked attractive in a white buckskin riding skirt and a pale blue blouse. That outfit had come all the way from Houston.

Again she told herself this was all silly—that Bill Jordan meant nothing and the sudden thrill she got on seeing a horse grazing outside the small ranchhouse, was simply synthetic.

Bill Jordan came out of the house. He looked taller and huskier than ever.

He said, "Howdy, ma'am. What are you doing riding up this way?"

"I—heard you bought this place and I figured you might be here. I came to see your friend. About the wound."

"That's real nice," he told her. "Would be nicer if you brought your pa along. Anyway, Tom ain't here. He's resting in town while I'm straightening up this place."

She dismounted and walked swiftly up onto the porch. She saw a broom propped just inside the door and she picked it up. The house hadn't been lived in for a long time and it needed a cleaning badly.

"This is the kind of work I do best," she said. "You handle the heavier jobs."

"Now see here. . . ." he began in protest.

"Don't argue. I'm just being neighborly. If you don't get started you'll never have this place cleaned up."

Soon after noontime she investigated the kitchen and found that he'd laid in a small supply of food. She found some old dry wood in the wood box and got a fire going in the range. In half an hour bacon was frying, beans were heating and in the oven some mighty light biscuits were browning on top. It was the smell of the biscuits that drew him back to the house and he sniffed appreciatively when he came in. The table was washed clean, and set.

"Light," she said. "I'll dish it right up."

"You're sure being neighborly," he told her. "Reckon I had you kinda wrong."

He complimented everything she put before him and ate enough to fill three men. Finally he leaned back and drank his fifth cup of coffee along with a cigarette. During the meal their conversation had mostly concerned itself with this ranch and Susan had a few ideas he promised to adopt.

She said, "I hope you undersand about this gunshot business, Bill. It was the only way to make this town settle down."

"It'll take more than that," he said. "I think the whole idea is crazy."

She got up slowly. "Oh, you do! Now listen to me, Bill Jordan—that happens to be my pet idea and I know it will work."

He shook his head and gave her a lazy grin. "Not your idea at all, Susan. That hatchet-faced Mrs. Parkins thought it up, and not all the women folk agree with her or with you."

"You seem to know a lot for having been here only a few days," she said.

"Well, I been getting around some. It was Betty Lorraine told me she wasn't crazy about the idea, and some of the others did too."

Susan compressed her lips tightly. It would be Betty. She latched onto any man who rode into La Mesa, so long as he was under seventy. And Betty had been one of the more enthusiastic supporters of the program.

She said, "If men realized they might die when they start shooting, they won't go for their guns so fast. There may be other ways of making the West grow up and forget its crazy tough ways, but all that are known have been tried and failed."

"Not quite all," he said. "I been doing some thinking about it. Let's forget the whole thing and wash up these dishes. I'll see if that old pump'll draw enough water to do 'em; otherwise I'll take me a bucket down to the spring."

The pump worked very well and Susan had the water heated quickly. They stood side by side, he wielding the dish towel while she washed. Neither knew exactly how it happened, or even why, at that particular moment. But suddenly Susan was looking up into a pair of the most thoughtful eyes she'd ever gazed into and his arms were around her. For all his size he was extremely gentle and she found his lips surprisingly soft and warm. It was a long kiss, broken off slowly, and for a

full two minutes they just stood there looking at each other. Then he gently disengaged himself.

"Reckon I knew that was going to happen the first time I laid eyes on you and I wish I knew whether or not I'm sorry it did."

"Sorry? Why should you be, Bill?"

"Because women who reach too far ain't the kind of women I like. They make their own rules and, fair or not, expect everybody to abide them. Me—sometimes I wonder if there's a loop strong enough to keep me pinned down for branding. Especially by a woman like that."

She gasped and stepped back. "Why, you . . . you . . . go to Betty Lorraine. Perhaps she'll understand you better than I do. I wish I'd never even seen you, Bill Jordan. I . . . I hope you get into a gun fight and are wounded so you'll find out that this is no whim of the women of La Mesa, but hard, cold facts. And you can clean up your own dad-blamed ranch-house."

She fled from the house, found her horse, and was ready to mount when she realized she wore an old apron which she'd found in the kitchen. She ripped if off, balled it and threw it onto the ground. She thought she heard him laugh as she rode away, but when she turned around, he was walking back to the house and from the back he didn't look like a man who had just been inspired to laughter.

The rest of the day she spent in moods alternating between black and white. Hate and love. She hated him and she wanted him near her. He was an egotistical male—and he had every right to be. Her plan was the only way to save La Mesa—and it was a crazy plan. On only one subject did she come to a complete agreement with herself. She hoped Betty Lorraine would come down with a case of measles.

It was shortly after the dinner hour and Doc hadn't come back, as usual. She kept everything in the oven and waited with a patience born of experience. Then she heard the gate open and she hurried to the door, but it wasn't Doc who walked up. It was Pete Dawes, a man who lived for, of and by the gun. A rustler, horse thief, gambler and all around badman. It was his boys who had been responsible for the attack on Tom Andrews.

He was a lean, hard man with black hair and eyes. He walked with the grace of a wildcat and had a temper to match. Some said his main ambition in life was to kill a man for every year of his life and that he wasn't too far from attaining his goal.

Dawes said, "I'm looking for Doc, ma'am. He about?"

"I expect him soon," she said. "Will you wait?"

"Well, now, you just tell Doc to come over to the hotel. It's Ace Aker, one of my boys. He's got a hole in his chest and he's kinda bad."

"A bullet hole?" she asked carefully.

"Yep—some new jasper in town drilled him."

"Then there will be no use in waiting," she said. "Doc won't take care of a man wounded by a bullet."

Dawes took off his hat and wiped his forehead. "Been hearing crazy stories like that, but figured they couldn't be true. I'll wait anyway."

"I tell you it won't do you any good," she said.

"Reckon maybe it will. Doc takes care of Ace—he pulls him through no matter how bad he is—or this here town will need a new doctor pronto. If you think I don't mean it—just let Doc refuse to come."

SUSAN was looking over Pete Dawes' shoulder, at Betty Lorraine, who sauntered by, pink shade umbrella up, flouncy dress calling plenty of attention to the wearer.

Susan said, "You can wait if you like. Excuse me just a moment." She brushed

past him onto the porch and called Betty's name. Betty, somewhat surprised, came to a stop.

Susan said, "Betty, I've got that medicine for your pa. You wait there and I'll fetch it right away."

She pushed past the outlaw again, picked up any bottle she found in the office and hurried out to the gate. She handed the bottle to Betty.

"Pete Dawes says one of his men is wounded and if Doc doesn't pull him through, he'll kill Doc. Betty—you know Doc won't treat a bullet wound."

"But. . . .Pete Dawes. . . ." Betty gasped.

"I know. We've got to do something."

"The marshal," Betty suggested hopefully.

"Don't be an idiot. The marshal is scared stiff of Pete. Betty—find Bill Jordan. Tell him what's happened. Tell him the wounded man is at the hotel."

"Bill Jordan! Susan, I left him only a little while ago. I think he's still in town."

Susan felt the savage wrench at her heart, but overpowered any feeling of jealousy. "That's better than I hoped for. Find him, Betty. Tell him what I told you."

"I'll do that right away," she said. "I'll tell Tom Andrews too. . . ."

"Hurry," Susan urged. She turned back and walked slowly to the house. Pete Dawes followed her.

A minute later Doc came up the walk.

Pete Dawes said, "Howdy, Doc. Don't bother to put down your bag or take off your hat. One of my boys been shot up bad. I want you to cut out the bullet."

Doc said, "You know better than that, Pete. I said I wouldn't."

"You'll treat this one," Dawes said.

"You're mistaken, Pete."

"Reckon I ain't, on account of my boy got shot up on your account, Doc. He tangled with a galoot named Tom Andrews and put a slug in him. You sure enough treated Tom Andrews."

Susan broke in quickly, "That's a lie. I put a bandage on Tom Andrews' shoulder."

Pete Dawes shrugged. "Maybe you did, but Doc was in his hotel room that same night and fixed him up real good. So doggone good this here Tom Andrews went hunting Ace, and when he found him, they had a gun fight. Ace is bad hurt. That Tom Andrews is mighty fast with a sixgun."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," Doc said.

Dawes simply slid his Colt out of its holster and poked the muzzle against Doc's midriff.

Doc looked at Susan and shrugged. He turned and walked back to the path to the gate with Dawes right behind him. Susan ran into the house and searched the drawers of Doc's desk until she found the old sixgun he once carried when Indians infested the trails. It was loaded, so she merely wrapped the weapon in a scarf to hide it, and then hurried toward the hotel herself.

Bill Jordan was approaching from the opposite direction and they met at the foot of the stairs. He said, "Some idea you and the women folk had. Ace is dying and Doc couldn't save him if he wanted to. Pete Dawes is riled up and murdering mad."

She said, "Bill—I'm glad Betty found you. I need your help so much. Please do what you can for Doc."

"I'm likely to get myself shot up. Then what happens? Do I just walk around toting the slug the rest of my life?"

"I told you the whole idea was wrong," she said earnestly. "Doc needs your help. Bill—if not for me, do it for Betty. She's in this too."

"What in tarnation's Betty got to do with it?" he asked. "Don't bother to answer. Stay right here. You interfered too much already."

He hitched up his gunbelt. Someone hailed him. It was Tom Andrews riding up fast. He vaulted off his horse as if that wounded left shoulder was entirely healed, which it couldn't be. He looked at Susan and grinned.

"Betty found me too," he said. "That gal sure knows how to ride. Let's go, Bill. We got us a job of work to do."

They strode into the hotel, across the lobby and up the stairs. Susan waited half a minute and then followed them. When she reached the second floor, they had a door open and she could hear loud voices.

Tom Andrews said, "I shot Ace in self-defense and I'll do the same again."

Doc spoke, quietly, but Susan heard every word. "You did more than just shoot him, Tom. He's dead, and Pete Dawes says I'm responsible because I fixed up your shoulder. . . ."

"You're a damn fraud," Pete Dawes shouted. "You talk loud about not helping anybody who gets shot and then you sneak out and fix them up when nobody knows about it. Like you fixed up Tom Andrews so he could shoot Ace. I'm getting you, Doc. Sooner or later I'm getting you. . . ."

"It'll be much later," Tom said. "I was just sworn in as marshal of La Mesa and you're arrested as of right now. With what I got on you, Pete you'll spend a lot of time in the prison at Amarillo."

Susan gasped and started to move forward, but stopped quickly. Just ahead of her a man pushed open the door of a room and tiptoed out. He was holding a sixgun and there was no question but that he was one of Pete Dawes' men or of what he intended to do.

Susan automatically raised her scarf-covered sixgun and pulled the trigger. There was no thought, except that what she did was absolutely necessary. The gunman gave a wild yell, lurched against the wall. His gun fell out of a paralyzed hand.

Then Bill Jordan was in the hall, gun ready. Susan went to him, heedless of the gunman or anything else. His left arm went around her, his right held the gun covering the wounded man. Doc came out, took in the situation quickly, and went to work.

Later, Bill told her a few facts she didn't know. "Doc," he said "took care of anybody. You and the women in La Mesa just didn't know it. He came to the hotel and fixed up Tom Andrews and talked him into becoming marshal here. La Mesa sure needed a better marshal and it's got one now."

She said, "Bill, I was wrong."

"Well now," he told her, "your intentions were good. Folks needed to be shown how bad this town was. You helped show 'em. But what we need here more than a doctor who won't treat gun wounds, is a marshal who has no fear and can shoot faster'n jaspers like Pete Dawes and Ace Aker. We could stand a church too—and a preacher who'll put some fear into us."

"Yes," he said. "You're right, Bill."

"Tom and I thought of the church soon after we got here. We'll get to work on it right away because Betty wants to be married in a church real bad."

Susan said, "Bill, I don't blame you. I'm a little fool and Betty deserves you more than I, but . . . but . . . oh, darn it, I'm in love with you too."

He was staring at her. "I take that as kind of bold," he said, and the slow grin was shaping again. "Happens it's Tom and Betty going to be married. I didn't have any ideas on the subject until I met you and then I figured there wasn't much use in my even thinking about it."

She moved up to him. "Bill Jordan, you do some thinking about it. Do you hear me? And that church is to be built pronto."

"Yes ma'am." He nodded. "I'll take up a collection if I have to use my sixgun to do it. I ain't aiming to wait very long, either." ♥ ♥ ♥

Tamed Curly Wolf

I ride after cattle, I wear faded jeans,
My favorite fruit is them berries called beans.
I warm a cold saddle when weather gits raw,
I ride trails that's rougher than hell ever saw.
I straddle wild broncos that know how to pitch,
I cuss when it suits me and scratch when I itch.
I grab brandin' irons by the end that ain't hot,
And wash once a month if I need it or not.
My ways is as wild as coyotes that roam
The sagebrush and cactus. I ain't got no home
Except any cowcamp that happens to be
In need of a saddle-warped waddy like me.

By LANCE KERMIT

My chin whiskers bristle like hair on a hog,
My readin' is mainly a mail catalog.
I count it a blessin' to breathe corral dust,
And put all my faith in a cinch that won't bust.
I spend all my wages as quick as I git 'em—
I may have some faults, but I sure don't admit 'em!
In short, I'm a cowpoke, the surly wolf kind,
With nothin' but cow, hoss and grass on my mind.
At least until lately them markin's was mine:
A lone wolf on hossback, I got along fine.
But now I can feel a big change comin' on:
I'm sure tamin' down, and my bristles is gone!
I still ride the cow trails out there where the sage is,
But all of a sudden I'm savin' my wages.
I wash my neck oftener, wear my hair brushed,
And mostly, on cussin', I keep my mouth hushed.
For now I'm a wolf of a much tamer kind,
With somethin' besides cow and hoss on my mind.

You wonder what's caused all this change in my style?

I got hit in the heart by a nester gal's smile!

KISS BRANDED

By
LLOYD ERIC REEVE

Giving her heart to the tall, bronzed young man who rode out of the night to save her, was tempting fate to make Sally a widow before she could be a bride

RIDING across the desert on her way home from town, late that afternoon, Sally Lane glanced apprehensively at the boiling black thunder clouds. In the high mountains to the west, it was already raining.

"Shake a leg, Star," she urged her mare. "It's going to plumb pour."

Star headed through the jumble of rocks and boulders which had been swept down this wide wash by countless cloudbursts. They were halfway across when the horse shied suddenly at the wild bawl of a calf.

Instinctively, Sally reined up. To the left, partly concealed in chaparral, the little animal was struggling frantically. Despite the imminent storm, Sally jumped from the saddle, more like a slim boy than a girl in her jeans, sombrero, and man's shirt. She hurried to the writhing calf.

It was caught by an ankle in the forked trunk of a mesquite. She took hold of its leg, tugging, but so tightly was it wedged that she couldn't budge it. For several minutes she pulled and hauled uselessly, until she was panting from exhaustion. As she finally paused, to catch her breath, it began to rain furiously. Star snorted nervously.

Sally knew she should hurry, yet couldn't quite bring herself to leave the calf trapped.

Quickly she tried to free it. Finally, to pry the branches apart, she threw all her slight weight into one hard thrust. And this time it worked. The calf's flying hoof just grazed her face as it kicked free.

It ran off wildly, bawling at every lumbering leap.

Sally turned toward Star, in the pouring rain, and in that same instant there was a shattering crash of thunder, a blinding flash of lightning. The frightened horse whirled suddenly, lit out for home at a dead run. She took a few futile steps calling after it angrily. Then she saw it vanish through that drumming deluge.

She started hurrying afoot across the wide wash. She was drenched, now, unable to see clearly through those lashing curtains of rain. And then suddenly she heard a distant roar, which, like the sharp buzz of a rattlesnake, no desert-born person can ever mistake. She glanced over her shoulder and saw, far up the wash, a solid wall of foaming water, ten feet high,

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"Let's get to my cabin, quick!" she said.

There had been a cloudburst in the mountains. Only now, running wildly, did she realize how foolish she had been to remain during a storm. She remembered with what terrible swiftness floods roared down these desert washes, sweeping away everything in their path.

She was running, now, with frantic desperation. Too frantically, for she tripped suddenly over a mesquite root and fell with stunning force. As she struggled to get up, she believed all hope was gone, that by this instant's delay she was irrevocably doomed.

And then, hardly able to believe her ears, she heard a voice, an urgent shout penetrating only faintly the tremendous din of that approaching flood. The next instant a horseman had swept up beside her on a roaring charger, looking, in this raging storm, like the awesome figure of the Rain God himself.

"Here, son!" he shouted. "Quick! Up here with me!"

Then he was bending toward her, his long arm sweeping around her waist. She felt herself swung up in front of him. Almost with the same movement they were hurtling away, thundering off in a desperate race to escape that charging avalanche of water.

At a wild run, the great horse hit the bank of the wash, went up it in a series of long bounds. At the same instant, from below, there was a thunderous canonading, like a thousand explosions at once, as that foaming wall of water roared over the very spot upon which, only a minute ago, they had stood.

Sally felt limp and weak. She turned her head, gazing up through the driving rain into her rescuer's face, though it was too dark now to really see him. "Mister," she declared, "you sure got here just in time!"

"Good gosh!" he exclaimed. "You're a girl! I mean—dressed in those clothes, I thought you were a boy."

Water poured from the rim of his sombrero, his slicker gleaming, his wet face in the blinding lightning appearing and vanishing like shining bronze. She had to shout to make herself heard above the incessant thunder.

"My cabin's only a short distance west!" she told him. "Let's get there quick, out of this rain!"

He nodded, wheeled the huge horse. Again they were bounding away, as on great wings, through that elemental fury of storm. It was only later that she bitterly wondered why, in this moment, she had trusted him so implicitly.

WITHIN ten minutes they reached the cabin. Sally hurried into the kitchen while the stranger sheltered his horse under the lean-to shed. She had just lit the lamp when he came in, thrusting the door shut against the swirling blasts of rain.

His long slicker was shining with water, dripping. He took off his sombrero, shed the slicker, laid it across a chair. He was six feet tall, and he had broad shoulders, flat thighs, a lean, pleasant face. For an instant she was oddly startled because he looked so familiar, even as she knew that actually she had never seen him before today. He was glancing around the room.

"Aren't your folks home?" he asked.

"I haven't any folks," she said.

"What? You live here alone?"

She nodded. "Mother died long ago, father last year. About all I know is how to run cattle."

She was suddenly aware of how terrible she must look, jeans and shirt pasted wetly against her slender body, her hair hanging limply from under her sombrero.

"Start a fire in the stove," she told him briskly, "and get yourself dry. It'll only take me a minute to change. Then we'll have some hot supper."

He gave her an odd glance. "But I didn't know you lived alone here. Maybe I better ride along."

"In this storm? Don't be foolish!" She laughed. "I always give a meal to people who save my life."

He hesitated another instant, then accepted. "Miss," he said, smilingly, "I'll be right obliged."

She saw then the gray weariness in his face, a haunted grimness. Almost as though he had left some desperate part of himself outside, and had come into this cabin only as an interlude for some mission as elemental and darkly wild as the very storm in which he had first appeared. Without knowing why, she was suddenly sorry for him, felt an impulsive warm tenderness within her.

She went into her bedroom, shut the door, lit a lamp. Slipping from her sodden garments, she rubbed herself vigorously with a towel. A happy excitement possessed her now, an odd breathlessness, as though she were suddenly on the threshold of some shining new experience.

Ordinarily she wore only men's clothing around the ranch. Now, instinctively, she put on her prettiest dress; because for the first time in her life it seemed suddenly imperative that this man should see her only as an attractive woman.

When she returned to the kitchen he had the fire going and was facing the stove. He turned, and his gaze was abruptly intent. More clearly than words it told her how becoming this pretty dress was. That her dark hair was curling in tighter ringlets than ever after its recent wetting, that her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks soft and warm. She realized, somehow surprised, that they didn't even know each other's names.

"I'm Sally Lane," she said.

"My name's Morgan," he replied. "Tom Morgan."

"Mister Morgan, howdy. It's nice to meet you." She laughed. "And now I'll get supper; have it on the table in a jiffy."

She had never heard his name before. And still she couldn't shake that feeling of remembering him. It was almost as though her heart had somehow anticipated him, imagined someone like him for so long that now when she finally did see him it was as if she had known him always.

"Aren't you ever afraid," he asked suddenly, "living way off here alone?"

She shrugged. "What on earth is there to be afraid of?"

"Well, you're an uncommon pretty woman," he told her bluntly. "What I mean, wild enough hombres go riding around."

"They don't bother me." She added, a little primly, "I never have anything to do with strangers."

He burst out laughing. She flushed, suddenly aware how contradictory her statement sounded after the way she had brought him here. "Well, after all," she said, "you're different. I can hardly call a man who saved my life a stranger."

Again he gave her that odd glance, then fell silent. His thoughts seemed to have left her now, withdrawn bleakly to some distant bitter place. And she felt suddenly desolate, lost, as though standing helpless while something shining and precious slipped forever from her grasp.

She was only nineteen. This trying to run a ranch, denying her girlhood to earn her bread in a man's hard way, hadn't been easy. Mostly it was just terribly lonely. And she had never been in love. She wasn't now. You couldn't possibly be in love with a man you had known less than an hour. Or could you?

When the food was ready, she said, laughing, "Come and get it, or I'll throw it out!"

They sat down at the table, started eating. He looked up approvingly. "You wrangle an uncommon good bait!"

"Well, cooking is a woman's work."

"But you say you run cattle too," he reminded. "That's a man's job."

She shrugged. "I've ridden the range ever since I was a kid."

When they finished eating he insisted on helping her with the dishes. Once, as she reached past him, his hand lightly brushed her bare arm. And then she *knew*. That brief contact was suddenly a bright fusing flame. She felt weak and shaken. It was no longer anything she could deny, or understand, or prevent. It simply *was*, like the earth was, or the stars, or the eternal sun. Simply, she loved this man, had loved him long before she ever met him.

Suddenly, with what seemed like blinding swiftness, the dishes were finished and he was picking up his slicker. He was going away, and she would never see him again.

She protested, almost desperately, "But you mustn't go yet! It's still raining."

"It's letting up." He was pulling on his slicker. "Miss Sally, I'm uncommon obliged for the food. And—well, for your company."

"Wait!" She found she had turned impulsively, was crossing the room. From a shelf, she took a tiny clay figure. It was less than an inch square. She came back to him, holding it out to him.

"Here's something I want you to have," she told him. "An Indian girl gave it to my mother long ago."

He took it in his big hand, a little puzzled. "But what is it?"

"An Indian rain god," she said quickly. "A sort of luck piece. Yes, it's supposed to bring luck to anyone carrying it!"

That wasn't exactly true; but she couldn't bring herself to tell him the real meaning of this gift, the story her mother had told her so long ago.

"Well, I thank you," Tom Morgan said. That curiously remote look was in his eyes again. "I might be needing luck."

He walked to the door, then looked back, with sudden gravity. "Miss Sally," he said, "I've got a business that has to be done. But when it's over, if I still can, I'm coming back. Miss Sally, I aim to see you again."

And then he was gone. He had opened the door swiftly and vanished into the black swirling rain from which he had first appeared.

BUT now Sally Lane's heart was singing; her dark eyes were shining. She was remembering only the last words he had said, "Miss Sally, I aim to see you again." Soon he would return. He would ask her to marry him. She was certain of this as she was that the sun would still rise, that the earth would turn.

And then she saw it; a slip of paper on the floor, beside the chair where his slicker had been so carelessly thrown. She picked it up, glanced at it casually.

Her dark eyes flared. She jerked as rigid as though an invisible arrow had agonizingly pierced her heart. She couldn't believe what she actually saw. Again and again she read what was written on this crumpled slip of paper, as if by repeated reading she might somehow change the words. But she couldn't. The note said:

> Meet me at the Ghost Gulch hideout Wednesday night, for your cut of the gold. But watch out; cover your trail in. They know now it was us who held up that stage, and they are out to get us.

This was Tuesday. Wednesday night would be tomorrow. So this was the pressing business Tom Morgan had—if Tom Morgan really was his name. This note was his, had obviously fallen from his slicker pocket. It told her beyond a doubt, simply and coldly, that he was a wanted criminal.

She walked over and sat down in a chair beside the table. What a fool, what an awful fool, she had been. Taking him in, putting on her prettiest dress, simpering, wearing her heart in her face—for a thief!

Rain still rattled wildly on the roof. Lightning flashed sharply. A faraway mutter of thunder was like some great black beast stalking across the last lonely rim of the world.

And she had given him the tiny rain god. She burned now with humiliation, remembering the significance of that symbol, its true meaning as a gift.

She despised him. And then suddenly she buried her face in her hands, sobbing. Because now she knew terribly that a woman can bitterly despise a man, and yet, helplessly, still love him. . . .

The skies were clear that next morning. Everywhere there was sunshine, except in the heart of Sally Lane. Defensively she told herself she would forget Tom Morgan, would never think of him again. And all the time she was remembering that tall body, that drawling voice, that lean pleasant face—and the smiling face of a thief.

But there was work to do. Cattle had drifted in last night's storm. By hard enough work, exhausting herself, perhaps she could forget.

All day she rode hard, rounding up scattered strays, hazing them back to their habitual range. By late afternoon she had succeeded in exhausting herself—but not in forgetting.

She was riding back to the cabin, less than a mile away, when she met Sheriff Lem Mullins. He rode out of the heat-hazed south, chin sunk against his chest, grizzled mustache drooping, his eyes half-closed, like a great horned toad, drowsy with warmth.

"Hello, honey," he said.

He never called her anything but honey. He had ridden her on his knee before she could walk. She thought it was strange that this old man who had killed at least a dozen desperate gunmen always seemed so fatherly and gentle.

"Howdy, Lem," she said. "How's the sheriffing business?"

"Tolerable, honey," he told her. "Got something boiling in the pot right now."

She gave him a sharp glance. "Yes?"

His eyes were half-closed again. He seemed almost asleep. "Going up to Ghost Gulch," he said. "Catch a feller."

It was as though a clammy hand had suddenly clutched her heart. Tom Morgan's note had said Ghost Gulch; that was where he was to meet his partner.

"Feller up there to meet a partner," the old peace officer rumbled on, "and divide the loot they got in a stage holdup. I learned about it. Got to get him now. Desperate man. Sort of setting a trap up there, spring it after dark tonight." Suddenly the innocent blue eyes opened wide again, staring at her. "What's the matter?"

She was afraid he'd heard the horrible knocking of her heart. "I'm just tired out," she said. "I've been riding all day in the sun."

"Well, get along home," Lem growled. "Put your head under the pump."

He clucked to his horse, rode off wearily. She called after him, "Take care of yourself, Lem."

BACK at the cabin, she put up her horse and went inside. She forced herself to do the ordinary routine things, to cook supper, to eat, to wash the dishes. And all the time she was desperately frightened because Tom Morgan was about to be arrested, or killed.

She alone could save him now. She could still ride to Ghost Gulch, could warn him in time. To do that would be wrong. And not to do it would be to remember always that she could have saved him, and hadn't.

Whatever happened to Tom Morgan, he deserved. But why, she thought, must it be my body, too, that is imprisoned, or torn agonizingly with angry bullets—as if we were not two, but only one?

She would go to bed. She would make herself sleep. When she awoke tomorrow it would be all over.

She walked to the door of her bedroom. She forced herself to take hold of the knob. And then she spun around, ran from the cabin like a frightened deer. Wildly she raced to the corrals, saddled a pony with

(Continued on page 97)

When Joany went sparkin' for a life-time pardner, she should have stayed clear of her father's feud—and his dashing enemy. . . .

OUTLAW LOVE DIES HARD

By MARGERY FRAZIER

THE LATE afternoon sun shone on the waters of the tiny pool. Its rays fell warmly upon Joany's slim body as she lazily shed her garments, one by one. She gave no thought to intruders, for it was a law among the bandits who laired up in Wolf's Valley that none of them come near the glade. And law or not, it would have been as much as a man's life was worth for Red Milette, their leader, to catch one of them near his daughter's bathing pool.

Joany stood for a moment on the brink, stretching her young tanned body, which was slim almost to thinness, yet with the curves of utter femininity. Her red-gold curls, that were like molten metal under the sunlight, framed a piquant face, an elfin sort of face, made more so by the dark brows which quirked upward, like the wings of a flying blackbird. Her eyes shone startlingly dark from a face as creamy-skinned as a yucca bloom.

Some unrest lay in those dark eyes today. A queer turmoil raged in her heart; a longing that was almost an ache, and yet was nameless—like a yearning for food she wasn't sure even existed, or for the sight of a land she only guessed lay beyond the horizon.

"Rudolph says I need to travel," she told the breeze. "But Calico says it's just cussed human nature, and no good can come from it." She laughed, thinking of Calico, the gaunt middle-aged man who had been nursemaid, governess and teacher to her, through the eighteen years of her life.

She clasped her hands above her head, ready to dive, when a sound paralyzed her—a man's voice, here in the forbidden glade!

"Please!" it said, in muffled tones. "I've not been lookin' at you—but I've got to talk to you!"

Like a startled fawn, Joany caught up the soft Angora blanket she had brought to wrap herself in after her bath, draped it about her, and started to flee.

"Please!" came the voice again, so urgent, so filled with vibrant power, that Joany stopped, looking with wide dark eyes toward the voice. She was fear-filled and she was angry, yet some greater emotion held her there, made her listen.

"Get dressed and come back," the voice went on. "Please, I'm in danger and I need you."

Joany hesitated no longer. There was

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A blaze of glory surrounded them. . . .

something about that voice which strangely answered the yearning she had known lately. Slipping into the thicket, she put on her clothes and hurriedly smoothed back the mass of red-gold curls. Her heart still beat painfully; but fear was gone, leaving a queer happiness, as she went back.

"What is it?" she asked huskily.

The thicket parted and the man crawled out, smiling at her. With her first glance she saw he was young. Dark hair tumbled in unruly locks over his wide forehead. His eyes were gray, a silvery gray, like the smoke that rises from a clean campfire; but there were flame-sparks of gold in them, too. Then her glance went lower, saw the blood on his flannel shirt, and she gave a little cry. "You're wounded!"

He nodded, his smile fading to grimness. "A bullet from behind," he said. "And I've lost my gun."

She was already kneeling beside him. It wasn't a bad wound; the bullet had grazed the ribs under his arm. Even now blood seeped steadily from the wound, Joany found, as she bathed it in cold water from the pool.

"Why did you come here?" she asked. "My father doesn't like strangers up here. Everyone knows that, yet you come here, carrying a gun."

He looked up at her, his eyes seeming to probe her soul. "Who is your father?" he asked.

There was unconscious pride in the gesture as Joany lifted her bright head. "My father is Red Milette!" she said. Then, almost shyly, "I'm Joany Milette."

"I'm Steve Brown," he said, his eyes still holding hers. And there was something in his gaze that shattered, for Joany, all memory of the years when she hadn't known Steve. She felt as if she had known him always, as if he had been a constant part of her life. She tilted her face and her dark eyes were like quivering pools of fire, half screened by the fringe of long dark silken lashes.

"I came here to find your father," Steve said, after a time, in low tense tones. "How was I to know—it would be you?"

JOANY sat very still. Worlds dropped away from them, as they sat there, looking into each other's eyes. When he reached out, caught her hand and drew her close, she could only yield to him. Her bright head drooped to his shoulder; his face turned until their lips met. Then there was no world at all, only a blaze of glory surrounding the two of them—a blaze of glory that burned away all the strange yearning that had filled her lately.

The kiss ended, and they sat for a long time in wordless content, while the sun slipped over the rugged edges of the hills. When the first night breeze came sweeping up from the valley below, Joany shivered, stirred in his embrace, and the world closed in upon them once more. Looking up, she saw that Steve's eyes had darkened, as campfire smoke darkens when the first clean flames are gone; his face was grim.

"What is it, Steve?" she asked quickly.

"Joany, I told you I came here to see your father. I've got to see him—but it isn't fair that I've got to bring you hurt."

"What do you mean, Steve?" she asked.

A little silence, then he spoke in lifeless tones. "My grandfather is a miner," he said. "Last week he was down in Cowhide when your father and his men raided the Blue Bucket Saloon."

Joany nodded slightly, remembering the laughing bunch of men who had ridden recklessly out of Wolf's Valley that night—and their homecoming, with her father supported on his horse between two of the others.

"My grandfather had taken down his gold-dust—his first big clean-up—and one of your father's men, a big blond man with a scar over his forehead, took it from granddad at the point of a gun."

"Rudolph Heidner," Joany whispered. Then, "But why did you come?"

"I've come to get granddad's money back."

"You can't!" Joany returned sharply. "The men—"

"I knew it wouldn't be safe," Steve said, and glanced down at his shirtfront, wet with blood. "And this bullet in the back only makes me the more determined to be seein' your father."

She jumped up. "Neither my father nor any of his men would shoot anyone in the back! They're not like that. They're good—kind!"

She stopped at the look of scorn on Steve's face, and her thoughts delved frantically to find words to prove the kindness of her father and his men. There was the tenderness of her father, the big red-headed man who adored her. There was the kindness of old Calico, who had watched over her, taught her, scolded her, loved her. There was the generosity of Rudolph Heidner, her father's right-hand man.

Rudolph called her Princess, and brought her wonderful gifts, but his eyes had held strange lights, at times, lately, that frightened her. All the others had been kind, too, but somehow, none of the things she might tell seemed strong enough to hurl against that stark hard wall of disbelief that surrounded Steve now. She could only repeat:

"They're good—kind."

"They're outlaws!" Steve said coolly. "But—I'll tell all this to your father, not you."

"You can't!" Joany told him. "My father was shot on that raid last week. He's been in bed ever since."

The sun sank lower, and the dappled shadows left the glade. The pool lay like a dead black thing, and the trees trembled fearfully. Suddenly, Joany wanted to cry out, wanted to creep into Steve's arms and recapture the glorious moment they had known, and lost. But she couldn't get past the wall he had built about himself.

Then, like a lash, came the sound of another voice, Rudolph Heidner, coming close. "Joany!" he called crisply. "Joany, are you here?"

HER FACE whitened, as she pushed Steve toward the shelter of the thicket. "Wait!" she called sharply. "I'll come!" and she scrambled up, hurried outside the glade to where a tall blond man stood.

Until this last hour, Joany had always thought Rudolph Heidner the handsomest man she had ever known. Even the knife-scar on his forehead seemed only to accentuate the perfection of his handsome features. His skin was almost as white as a woman's, his mouth was soft—and crazily, as Joany saw it now, she thought of Steve's lips, hard, firm, and she remembered the tingling rapture of their touch upon hers.

The memory made her voice husky as she asked, "What is it, Rudolph? My father—he isn't worse?"

Rudolph shook his head. "It's something else," he said in his precise tones. "But it can wait. The sight of you makes it seem not so important!" Again the frightening lights came into his greenish eyes, and his soft hands caught her wrists. "You can make me forget everything, Joany! This last year, since you've grown up—so beautiful—" Then, pulling her closer with an irresistible strength, "I'm crazy about you!"

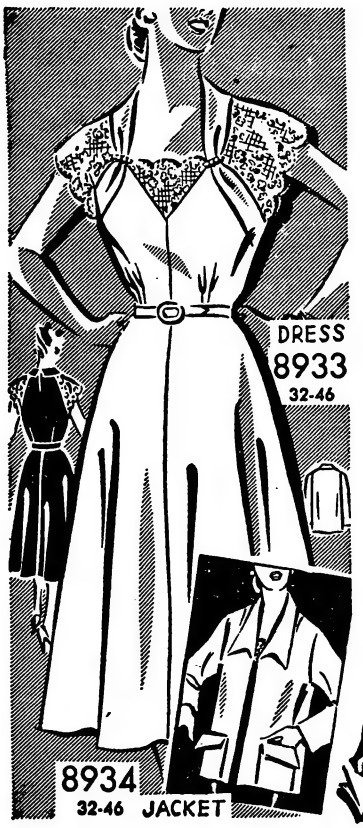
"Don't!" Her voice rose to frightened heights. "Please—" She jerked loose, backed away from him, panting. Then she asked, sharply, "You came for something else. What was it?"

His face suddenly hardened. "I came to search the glade," he said. "There's a man hiding around here—a man who has no right to be here. He stopped a bullet this morning, but he didn't die. He crawled this way and left a blood trail, and I will find him!" Then, abruptly, his narrowed eyes probing hers, "Have you seen him?"

Joany stared back, as if seeing him for the first time. And it was like seeing all

(Continued on page 101)

The Sewing



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By JACK BECHDOLT

BRAND YOUR MAN!

She had to gunherd her sweetheart into another's arms, in order to save his life!

ROXY LANE took the wobbly-legged calf out of Sam Winthrop's arms. "Come here, baby," she laughed. "I'll teach you how to rustle your breakfast."

Sam's hands were out in protest. "That little buster's too heavy for you to pack."

Roxy laughed his anxiety to scorn. Too heavy for some girls, perhaps, but not for Sam Winthrop's partner. Her eager young arms tightened about the stray and she walked down the aisle of dim, warm barn, seeking a foster mother from among the milk herd.

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"There's things I'd like to say to you, Roxy, but I can't."

Sam had found the new arrival in a snowdrift. Its mother had been pulled down by wolves. Sam had come striding in out of the dawn blizzard, calf in arms, a great figure of a man. He had set it down gently and wrapped it in blankets.

Just like Sam, Roxy thought. Every helpless young thing, stray puppy, colt, calf or chick, found a champion in Sam. Roxy and her kid brother, Cal, knew this. When their father died, Sam had taken them in. No charity about it at all, he'd insisted. Roxy would earn her keep by doing his housework. The boy, just turning eleven, would keep on with his schooling and do chores.

There had been two years of it—solid comfort in Sam's house. On winter eve-

nings they helped Cal get tomorrow's lessons and congratulated each other on his growing sturdiness and mental progress. They had toiled and worked together, day in and day out. And now Sam called her partner.

Roxy hugged the dear word to her heart.

She wanted to be Sam's partner, always. Sometimes—or did she imagine it?—Sam looked at her as if he shared that desire. Maybe one day he would realize she wasn't a kid any longer; maybe he would speak about a more glorious partnership that would last for a lifetime.

But more often Sam's gruff words of commendation and his occasional brotherly slaps on the shoulder were like the attentions he gave to the mavericks he was always rescuing. His good-natured, jocular remarks didn't signify anything except that his heart was big as all outdoors.

Roxy set the wobbly calf beside a placid, maternal cow and guided it to its breakfast. The calf did the rest, with a sudden gusto that made them laugh.

Sam's hand rested lightly on her shoulder. He ceased to watch the calf and looked at Roxy. His eyes lighted as her face flushed happily, a lock of her wavy black hair dangling from under her old sombrero. Roxy's dark eyes shone like dew under the morning sun. Her cute dimple danced in her cheek as she smiled at Sam.

Unconsciously, he clasped her shoulder more firmly.

Roxy's heart began to leap up and down like a Mexican jumping bean. Her senses were in a whirl. Her knees felt weak and watery. She leaned against Sam, lifting her face to his—and kissed him!

The kiss was sudden, unstudied. Her arms went around his neck and her eager lips pressed his. Then she was scared.

For a moment, his arms tightened convulsively as he kissed her in return. Then they opened to release her. His look frightened her, it was so stern and cold.

"Roxy!" he said in a harsh voice. "You're too old to play kissing games!"

Roxy's air castles tumbled all about her. She was frightened, ashamed and confused. It made her snap, "I'll do exactly as I please, Sam Winthrop. But don't worry, I'll never want to kiss you again!"

Sam groaned. It was clear that he had said the wrong thing. Roxy was mad at him and hurt. He stood there, helpless and bewildered before the fire in her eyes.

Before he could say anything, a tow-headed thatch appeared around the barn door. It belonged to Roxy's brother, Cal.

"Sam!" the boy shouted, all out of breath. "Folks coming! There's a whole bunch of 'em down in the front lot, right now. It looks like somebody's been hurt."

Obviously glad of the interruption, Sam ran out of the barn, Roxy following.

Seven men and one girl were coming into the yard. Two of the men had the woman between them, half carrying her slight form. They shouted their news; "Stage went into the ditch, Sam. This lady's hurt."

Roxy had never seen a girl like her. She was dainty, radiant with feminine charm. And her clothes were not the garb of people in that section. Why, she was more beautiful than the pictures in fashion magazines!

She had an arm over the shoulder of each of her helpers and hobbled on one foot, turning her head to smile frequently at them. When she smiled, her dark-fringed blue eyes lighted and gave each glance a personal and flattering distinction that made the proud men doubly careful of her comfort. She was pale from shock, but her lips remained invitingly red. A few locks of hair, dislodged from under a saucy felt hat, glinted pure gold in the daylight.

Sam's stride suddenly outdistanced Roxy. He went straight to the girl and her helpers, looming head and shoulders above the two tall men.

"Please let me, ma'am," Sam said gravely, and took her away from them. There was a swish of modish skirts and the childlike figure lay cradled in his arms, smiling into his face with those eyes that made men blush and stammer.

"Roxy," Sam said to the startled girl, "scoot in and get the parlor couch ready. Hurry, now!"

ROXY ran as she was bid, but the fast beating of her pulses was not due to exertion. The picture of Sam with that strange girl in his arms suddenly frightened her. Something sinister was about to happen. She could feel its approach.

Hurrying after Sam, as he carried the injured girl into the house, pressed one of her deposed rescuers, a shrewd-faced stranger in city clothes. His voice rang sharp with jangled nerves. "Careful with her, now! There may be a broken bone or two. Somebody call a doctor; the best doctor you can get!"

"Olcott, don't be ridiculous."

That was the first time they had heard Virginia Cameron's voice. The notes were like liquid silver. But sometimes the silver vibrated with a martial stridence.

Sam laid his burden on the couch gently, as if she were sleeping child. One slender arm remained twined about his neck, holding his head close to hers. She smiled her thanks.

Olcott burst out irritably, "The stage company's going to pay for this carelessness. They'll find they can't trust people's lives to drunken, incompetent drivers and not have to settle fat damage claims. When they find out who—"

"Olcott," said the silvery voice sharply. She beckoned him close and whispered something to him.

"But of course I'm staying here with you," he burst out. "This rancher can give me a bed, I hope?"

Sam was just about to assure him that

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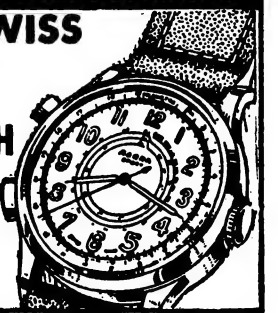

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he was welcome to a bed. The unspoken words shone in his honest face. Before he could speak the woman turned to him.

"This gentleman was a stranger to me when I boarded the stage at Three Feathers. He has been very kind and is naturally concerned about me. Will you please make it plain to him that I cannot accept any further attentions?"

Sam grinned down at Olcott. "Guess that's plain enough, isn't it, mister?"

"And suppose I tell you I'm going to stay?" Olcott blustered.

"Suppose you don't," Sam said, his voice suddenly grim. "This happens to be my house. I say who stays on my land. The lady doesn't need your help any longer, so you're not staying."

"Of all the damned impudence!" Olcott's face flamed. He gestured swiftly toward an arm holster that bulged with a weapon. But not so swiftly that Sam couldn't catch his wrist and twist it.

"Vamoose," Sam gritted. "You heard her say you're not wanted any longer. If I ever catch you here again, you cheap, gun-toting tinhorn, I'll break your neck."

Olcott rubbed the numbed wrist that Sam had released.

"Good-by!"

He jerked the word at Virginia. "Until I've the pleasure of meeting you again." But as he said it in French, neither Sam nor Roxy understood.

Virginia smiled up at Sam as Olcott slammed the front door. "You're so big and strong." She sighed. "You were wonderful. He isn't a friend of mine at all. Just a fellow passenger. At first he was very kind, but he was beginning to—to take liberties. I was afraid—I'll explain—later. . . ."

Her eyes closed. She lay limp and lovely as a silken doll tossed onto the blankets.

Sam stared at the helpless figure. "Get Doc Wilder!" he gasped "He's got to come out here hell-bent! Maybe she's dying."

Roxy examined the little invalid, marveling at her dainty silken underthings, the perfection of the little body beneath them.

"I don't think so, Sam. It doesn't look as if anything was wrong except a sprained ankle."

Doc Wilder backed up Roxy's diagnosis with professional authority. "Sprained ankle. She's a nervous type. A few days' rest will fix her up."

"Oh, but I can't impose on Mr. Winthrop!" the invalid wailed, opening her eyes again. "I'm a nuisance. I just feel terrible!"

"Now, ma'am, you hush up." Sam's roar oozed gentleness. "I'm boss of this ranch, and what I say goes. I say you stay here with us. And the longer you stay, the better I'll like it."

"You make me feel about nine years old," Virginia sighed. The long lashes fluttered over her blue eyes as if she could not bear the masterful authority in Sam's beaming face.

Sam jerked his head at the doctor, portentously. Wilder followed him and Roxy into the kitchen.

"Doc," Sam gulped, "this looks like a big order for a plain bachelor like me. What stumps me worst is what to feed her. "I've heard city people eat grapefruits and strawberries out of season. How the hell is a man going to find things like that at Three Feathers?"

"Feed her ordinary grub," Doc said. He smiled sardonically into two anxious faces—Roxy's was as worried as Sam's. "Grub," he repeated, "Beans, bacon, good nourishing steak and potatoes. Hell, she's human like you are. If she can't eat good, honest grub, let her lump it."

"Well," Sam said, scratching his head, "of course if you say so, Doc—"

Doc's indignant snort got rid of Sam. He turned to Roxy. "Who is she?" he demanded, jerking his head at the ranch-house parlor.

Roxy told him what Virginia had told

them. "She's a poor girl who makes her living teaching school. She was on her way to Cheyenne to look into a chance to get a job there."

"Teaches school? And wears clothes like hers? Schoolteachers don't usually go looking for vacancies in mid-winter!"

"Well, I guess that's her affair," Roxy defended loyally.

Doc took her chin in his hand, making her look at him. Doc liked Roxy Lane. He was one of her most ardent champions. He loved Sam too.

"Now look here," he bullied fondly. "Don't you go let Sam fall in love with this Virginia lady. Looks to me like he was beginning to, squawking about what to feed her, as if she was some kind of rare bird of paradise. Don't you stand for it, Roxy. I'm counting on you to make Sam a good wife, one of these days."

A beautiful, deep blush swept over Roxy's cheeks and neck. She jerked her head away and backed off, looking at Doc indignantly. "You mind your own business," she panted.

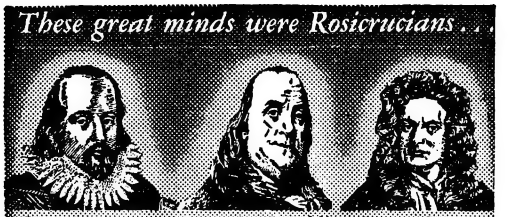
"Watch Sam," Doc repeated. "And don't you stand for any shenanigans."

CHAPTER 2 ♥ ♥ ♥

EACH NOON Roxy arranged Virginia's lunch on a tray. She tried to make it as attractive as possible with freshly laundered napkins, Sam's best china, and souvenir spoons that Sam's mother had bought on a trip to Chicago.

She and Virginia had long talks during those lunches. Sam would be out riding fence or spreading oil cake for the stock. Cal was away at school. The girls became quite friendly.

Virginia gave Roxy a pink slip and a pair of silk stockings that had been worn



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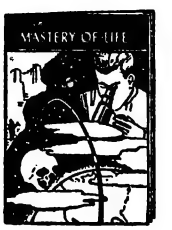

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only once. Roxy regarded the presents with awe. They were finer than anything she had ever owned; too elegant for her. Virginia also amused herself dressing Roxy's hair in a new way, which she said was all the fashion now.

"You look lovely," she said, studying the result. "Wear it that way at supper and I'll bet you'll knock Sam's eye out."

"Sam won't know the difference," Roxy scoffed. Nor did he. Sam didn't notice anything but Virginia.

Sam shaved every day now, instead of every other day. The towel roller in the kitchen was continually rattling with his hand washing. Every evening he sat for hours talking to Virginia, making her laugh. She laughed so easily! The house echoed the duet of her silvery notes and Sam's bass chuckles.

These things were hard for Roxy to bear. Busy with supper dishes, she would hear the duet and a lump would come into her throat.

It was not envy or resentment—it was just plain loneliness.

One night Sam didn't linger to talk with Virginia. Roxy, puzzled and worried, found him smoking a solitary pipe in the barn. When she sat down beside him on a bale of hay, Sam scarcely looked at her. There was trouble in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Sam?" she ventured finally.

"Nothing."

"It's Virginia," Roxy said.

She stated it with the sureness of an instinct more logical than logic—a newborn understanding of Sam that made her heart ache. "You love her, don't you, Sam?"

"No," Sam cried. Then, "Maybe I do. Leastways, I don't know. She's got me all excited and confused and—oh shucks, you're too young to understand what I mean."

Roxy wasn't young just then. She was a great deal older than Sam, made so by her love. She realized now that this was what she had been afraid of. This was the awful thing the coming of which she felt when she first saw Sam with Virginia's arms about his neck. It was her nightmare.

A long time ago, Roxy Lane had learned to walk right up to the thing that terrified her. Accept the challenge! Grab the dread creature by the horns! Better anything than to suffer from imagined terrors.

"I'll bet Virginia loves you," she said sturdily. "Why wouldn't she? A fine, big man like you! If I were you, I'd ask her."

"Go on! Why, you're crazy—"

"I'd rather be crazy than yellow about it," Roxy said. "That's how you're acting—like a scared cat. If you're half a man, you'll speak to her about it."

Sam's mouth hung open. "Well, I'll be damned," he said slowly. "Maybe you're right at that."

"I know I'm right." Roxy's hand lay over her heart to still the pain in it.

Sam rose, squared his shoulders and drew a deep breath. Without a word he strode out of the barn and went toward the house.

Roxy was left alone, with only the milk stock and the wobbly-legged maverick calf to witness her loneliness and tears.

Virginia's ankle had healed. When Sam was not around, or Cal, she could walk on it very well. To those admiring courtiers she still played the helpless invalid.

"Men love to do things for a woman," she confided to Roxy, her smile mischievous. "If you want to be popular, act helpless—and a little bit of a fool, my dear."

"I don't believe it's worth the trouble," Roxy said bluntly.

Virginia laughed. "Some day you'll change your mind. You are so very, very young!"

Sam had retired to bed. Virginia began to ask questions about him and the ranch. How much land did Sam own? How much

stock? How well did he manage his business? Roxy answered with conviction that Sam Winthrop was one of the most successful men in the county.

"He does seem almost perfect," Virginia agreed. "I'm beginning to think I'd be a fool not to marry him."

Out of a strained silence Roxy heard her own voice saying, "Has he asked you?"

"My dear!" The lovely laugh rang little silver chimes. "Not that he's said it in words, but—his actions! I know men!"

Roxy was silent.

Virginia saw the agony in her face. "This is awkward for you, isn't it?" She went on after a moment, "You'd like to marry him yourself."

Roxy's face flamed. She tried to make an indignant denial, but Virginia only laughed again. "You're too young for that, my dear. You'd never know how to hold a man like Sam. But if I should marry him, I'll serve notice right now I shan't allow a rival under my roof. I believe in being perfectly frank. You'll have to leave."

The girl leaped to her feet. Outraged pride showed in every line of her. "Don't worry. I wouldn't stay here. I can look after myself and Cal. The Lanes never asked favors of anybody and—"

"What was that sound? Be still, Roxy!" Virginia snapped.

They held their breaths, listening to a sound that came again, a cautious knocking at the front door of the ranchhouse. Roxy peered from a window.

"There're two saddle horses out front," she began, wonderingly.

Virginia had the door open. Roxy heard her say grimly, "I thought as much! Well, come in—and be mighty quiet about it. If Sam Winthrop finds you here—"

Roxy stared at the visitor. It was Olcott.

VIRGINIA closed the door and turned to the girl. "Mr. Olcott has come to discuss a personal matter," she said. "Will

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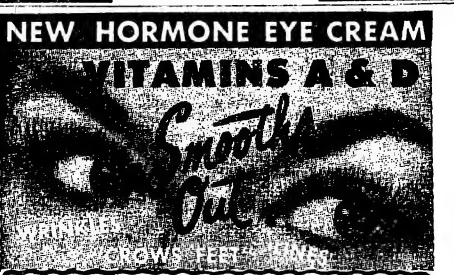

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you excuse us for not including you? Don't look alarmed. I'm perfectly safe with him—and Roxy, I'd rather Sam didn't know he was here."

Roxy closed the parlor door behind them. It was not to eavesdrop that she lingered a moment outside the door, only because she was bewildered.

She heard Olcott say angrily, "I hope you've come to your senses by now. I'm taking you away with me tonight."

"Are you, really?" Virginia answered. "To be quite frank, I'm thinking of staying here permanently—as Sam Winthrop's wife."

Roxy went upstairs and hesitated outside Sam's door. She wondered if he ought to know that Olcott was in the house. Of course, Virginia had a right to any company she chose. But at this time of night, coming surreptitiously as he did? Who was he?

She still lingered near Sam's door when the house rang with Virginia's voice. It was not silvery and gently amused now. It was urgent, frantic.

"Sam!" she screamed.

While Roxy stood frozen by that sound, the floor jumped under the impact of Sam's weight.

The door had burst open, revealing Sam still clothed except for his coat and vest.

"What is it? Where is she?" he demanded of Roxy.

"The man Olcott came back. She asked me to leave them alone."

"Olcott!" Sam's teeth made an ugly, grating sound. He lunged for the stair head.

Roxy caught his arm. "Sam! Don't fight with him. Don't!" She was trailing after him as he took the stairs two at a time. At the door of the parlor, he became aware of her presence.

"Go back upstairs," he said curtly. "Don't worry, there won't be any fight. I'm not packing a gun. All that's going to happen is that tinhorn is going out on his ear if he's as much as lifted a finger to annoy her."

He saw the terror in Roxy's eyes, and gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Scoot upstairs, kid." Then he opened the parlor door and strode into the rom.

Obediently, Roxy started up the stairs. She could hear the angry rumble of Sam's voice, the answering sharpness of Olcott's, and a word or two interposed by Virginia. She sounded shrill, terrified.

For a moment the voices quieted. Roxy breathed easier. Then Virginia screamed, "Look out, Sam!"

A heavy body drove against the wall, making the house shake. A chair smashed. There followed the unmistakable roar of a pistol discharged in a small room. Then —dread silence prevailed.

In a chill as icy as death, Roxy stumbled down the stairs. Her hand fumbled for the door knob, jerked it open at last. She stood just inside, her eyes fixed on the body that lay huddled beside the door. It was Olcott. He lay with one arm doubled under him, one hand clutching the door knob, as if he had tried to flee into the night when the murderous lead slug tore into his breast.

The other two occupants of the room apparently had not stirred since the shot. Virginia huddled on the couch, her eyes wide. Sam stood beside Olcott, staring at the weapon in his hand—a gun that still smoked.

It was Roxy who examined the body. She knelt and felt for a pulse. Olcott must have died instantly. Her eyes went to Sam, questioning.

He handed her the weapon. "Take good care of that, Roxy. It's his gun. The sheriff will want to see it." He groaned. "The damned fool shot himself. Accidentally, of course. He pulled this gun on me. I turned it aside and he insisted on trying to jerk it out of my hand. You saw the whole thing, Virginia?"

They turned toward the couch with the

question. The couch was empty. Virginia was gone.

"Poor young one," Sam said. "It must have been a terrible sight for her. Made her sick, I guess. You go help her, Roxy, while I phone the sheriff."

"The sheriff! Oh, Sam!"

"He's got to take charge here, right away."

Roxy lingered anxiously while Sam telephoned. Mention of the sheriff reminded her of the seriousness of this. Would the law believe Sam's story? Would they arrest him and take him to jail?

Fifteen minutes went by before Roxy thought of Virginia again. Going in search of her, she found that she was gone; her bag, with the silver-mounted toilet gadgets, and her frivolous silken underthings, had disappeared with her. One of the saddle horses Olcott had brought was missing. There was only one possible explanation. The city girl had taken the horse and run away.

For a moment something primitive in Roxy shouted with relief. With Virginia gone, Sam would have time to notice her.

Then she saw that this might be awkward for Sam. Of course, Virginia, unused to any violence, must have been terrified, poor little thing. But this was no time for her to lose her head! Suppose Sam was accused of murdering Olcott!

CHAPTER 3 ♥ ♥ ♥

"FIND Virginia Cameron!"

Harkness, prosecuting attorney for Cayuse County, was young, ambitious and eloquent. Today, his voice rang like a challenge, in the austere little courtroom at Three Feathers.

"Gentlemen of the jury, the State has tried to find Virginia Cameron. The State

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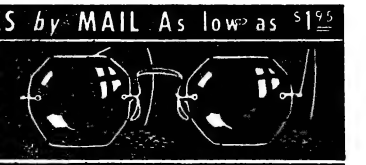

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would welcome the sight of this missing young woman, this much talked about, very beautiful, almost mythical Virginia Cameron."

The trained voice turned scornful. "Able counsel for the defense has tried to make you believe that we are afraid to face this missing witness; that the State's case would burst like a pricked balloon if she walked into this courtroom. The defense, gentlemen, has tried, by legal chicanery, to make you believe that Virginia Cameron would come into this court and clear Sam Winthrop of the charge of murder. My answer is that she would convict him!"

Cal's hand gripped Roxy's convulsively. "Why, the big liar!" he exploded.

His sister hushed him. She saw the jurymen nodding. They believed what Harkness said!

The prosecutor's words swelled with triumph. "You heard me ask the accused concerning his relations with this pretty young woman who was sheltered in his house. You heard him refuse to state whether she loves him. You heard me ask the same question of the girl, Roxy Lane. She tried to avoid answering.

"But she is a young girl, gentlemen, honest, innocent and unskilled at evasion. The answer was plain in her frightened attempts to remain silent. She knew that Virginia Cameron and Sam Winthrop were in love. That is why Virginia Cameron, the one eyewitness to Olcott's death, is not in this courtroom today. Virginia Cameron loves Sam Winthrop and she dares not come here and tell you what she saw when Winthrop killed Olcott with his own gun!"

Harkness was convincing the jury. Mouths folded tightly and eyes looked coldly at the prisoner. When the prosecutor thundered it so convincingly, even Roxy wavered. Had Sam killed Olcott? Had Virginia seen it and run away rather than have to testify against him? The evidence was damning. It might even send Sam to the gallows.

Roxy looked at Sam. His face was drawn, gray with fatigue. She looked at the judge, absorbed in his papers. The jury sat still and stern, weighted down by the importance of their task—to decide whether a man deserved to die. The courtroom crowd, enjoying a free show, watched the proceedings avidly.

The the trial ended. The jury filed out and returned almost immediately. Guilty! The verdict rang loud and clear in the courtroom. Justice would be swift and sure. Before the hall was clear, Roxy had heard Sam Winthrop sentenced to die on the scaffold.

"There's only one explanation," Sam sighed. "Virginia simply doesn't know the fix I'm in."

His invariable answer! Stubbornly, he had kept to this belief since the moment of his arrest.

"She wasn't in good health," he argued. "She's a tiny, frail little thing. The nasty shaking up she got in that stage accident made her nervous. She has no idea of the trouble she made when she ran away. She was scared. And now she's lying sick somewhere." He gulped painfully. "Maybe—maybe she's dead!"

Sam stuck to this idea. And there were just four days to go before the date of his execution!

The lawyer left Sam's cell with a shaking head. Cal tiptoed after him, at a gesture from Roxy. She was alone with Sam, as alone as one could be when a deputy watched from across the corridor.

Sam twisted his lips into a poor caricature of his old-time grin. "Well, partner, how're things at the ranch?"

"They're just fine, Sam!" Roxy's smile was as gallant as his. "You'd be surprised how Cal takes hold of things. He's awfully helpful!"

"Ought to be running the beef herd on some of that government range, about now?"

"We are, next week." She gasped as

she said it. Next week! Sam wouldn't be alive next week! Sam—Sam—

He saw the horror in her eyes and asked quickly, "And that wobbly-legged maverick—the calf? How's he?"

She tried to answer. The words wouldn't come out of her throat. She saw again the warm barn on that gray, snow-filled morning. She saw herself and Sam laughing at the maverick as it took breakfast from the foster mother.

She couldn't speak. Her hands flew out, groping for Sam. Her arms clasped about his neck.

He held her close—close . . . His arms were gentle, but strong.

FINALLY, Sam began to talk. His voice was low and steady. "Don't want to make you feel bad, partner. But there's a few things—business matters—I've got to mention. I—in case I don't get out of this, I—I'm leaving the ranch to you and Cal."

She couldn't say anything. At the moment his magnificent generosity toward two strays was unimportant. Her one desire was to cling to him to find some comfort in being where she had always longed to be, in his arms.

"You've been a fine partner," Sam went on, and for the first time his voice broke. "There's things I'd like to say to you, Roxy—but I can't—I can't—"

When he went on again, his voice was firm and as cheerfully casual as ever.

"Now, partner, time you scooted back to the ranch. Got to feed the stock, come hell or high water."

The work was all done. Cal ought to be in bed, Roxy thought. But she hadn't the courage to send him away. His silent companionship was welcome—and she needed companionship so badly.

Roxy sat, her hands idle in her laps, staring at nothing. Cal had the weekly paper, published two hundred miles away, spread over his lap. But he didn't look at it. The

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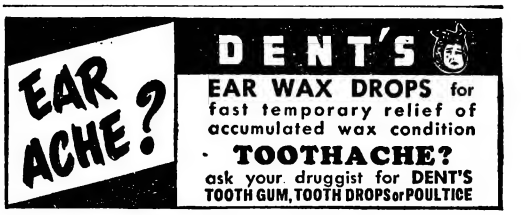
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house ached with loneliness for its master. Sam's dog, the dull cattle, even the jittery chickens watched her, as though asking where Sam was. She sighed, fighting back a sob.

"I guess it's beyond anything but prayer, now," Roxy said. "And I've prayed myself hoarse! If there was anything in prayer, wouldn't you think I'd get some kind of answer?"

Cal watched her with sidelong glances. His eyes held tears as he saw how thin her cheeks had grown, how haunted her eyes were.

He made a valiant attempt to divert her thoughts.

"It says in the paper that the Democrats are talking of nominating Senator Kane for governor next year. And there's a funny piece about the new women's hats. Want to hear it, Roxy?"

Then Cal's feet, propped on the nickeled guard rail of the stove, hit the floor with a thud. He stood upright.

His voice quivered as he spoke. "Roxy! Look at this! It's her—Virginia!"

She didn't understand.

"Here, in the paper!" cried Cal. "It's her picture!"

Roxy snatched the paper from him. She began to tremble violently and the half-tone portrait blurred and swam before her eyes. Yes, it was Virginia. The caption over the picture said:

> Senator Kane's daughter to wed millionaire Hardy.

Underneath was the legend:

> Virginia Kane, who will become the bride of the copper magnate Tuesday next. Sudden illness caused the postponement of Miss Kane's wedding last month.

A false name and a false story! Virginia was no penniless schoolteacher; she was the daughter of one of the richest men in the state. Sudden illness caused the postponement of her wedding! That was a lie, too. It was plain enough that she had taken another name and run away, to get out of the marriage. She had lied to everybody.

She wasn't ill and frightened, or pathetically dead. She was well—and hiding like a coward. And she knew of Sam's peril. She must. In the very paper that printed her picture was a brief news dispatch telling of Sam's conviction. She couldn't have missed seeing it.

All the ugly suspicions Roxy had put aside as disloyal were less ugly than the truth spread before her in that newspaper. Rage at Virginia fused the whole startling indictment of her in Roxy's memory forever. A liar, a cheat and a coward! And she almost had married Sam!

Roxy dropped the paper and snatched coat and hat off a peg beside the door.

"Roxy, where are you going?"

"Where? To find her!"

Roxy's voice was hoarse and frightening. "She lied," she gasped. "She lied about everything. She lied Sam into jail by running away. But she's not going to lie him into his grave!"

Thirty-five miles to the railroad!

By riding all night, she could make it in time to catch the daily train to the state capital in the morning. Head bent against a freezing blast, Roxy put spurs to her horse. The drifts were deep, landmarks hard to make out, but she had to get through!

Cal had orders to go to town and notify Sam's lawyer. But not Sam. Nobody must tell Sam. There was no predicting what fool chivalrous impulse would move him if he knew the truth.

Roxy boarded the train on time and rode while the day dragged interminably. Dusk saw her at the capital. She hired a rig and, grim-lipped, went in search of Virginia.

SENATOR KANE'S house blazed with lights. Roxy drew an inadequate coat tighter about her. Her hand, thrust into her

pocket for warmth, encountered the pistol she had put there for protection on her ride. Then, her heart beating furiously, she mounted the steps to the big white house.

A pert-faced girl in a maid's uniform answered her ring at the bell.

"Miss Kane," Roxy demanded hoarsely. "You can tell her it's an old friend calling."

The maid's appraising eyes took in the shabby coat and frost-pinched face, the worn work-shoes.

"Miss Virginia isn't seeing anybody," she said. "Don't you know they're having a big reception and dance for the wedding guests? If you're the extra help for the kitchen, you can go around to the back door."

The big front door closed smartly as she finished. Roxy stared at it, then turned to seek a path to the kitchen. A woman in a cooks's dress opened this door.

"I was sent to help for the party," Roxy announced.

The woman barely gave her a glance. "You're late enough. Put your coat and hat in there; get on an apron."

"In there," was a pantry-like cloakroom. It had a second door. Roxy went on through that. There must be a rear stairway somewhere, and Virginia would be dressing—yes, there was the stair.

A girl, descending with a tray, told Roxy which door to seek. Virginia's unmistakable voice answered her knock. When she entered, one hand was in the coat pocket where the gun nestled. Virginia sat before a mirror, putting finishing touches to an elaborate toilette. She didn't even glance up. "Put it on the table, whatever it is," she snapped. "And go away. I'm busy."

"Yes, and you're going to be busier," Roxy said. She was close behind Virginia now, and she touched the back of the girl's white, slender back with the cold muzzle of the gun. "There's a man waiting for you in a jail, at Three Feathers," Roxy said.

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"He's been waiting for you to save him from being hanged for a murder he didn't do. Don't try to scream. I can kill you before help gets here. And I don't want you dead. I need you alive, so you can tell the truth and save Sam Winthrop."

The dainty head, so aristocratic and proud on that slender neck, turned slowly. Virginia's rouge was livid against dead white skin.

She was afraid.

"Get into a wrap," Roxy said. "A good warm one. You'll need it, because you're going on a long ride. I'm going to be right close beside you all the way. Try to tell anybody what's going on, and you won't live to get the words out."

Virginia kept a terrified silence as they left Senator Kane's house together. She remained silent and docile when Roxy hired a livery rig and drove her to a station up the line, where they could board the evening train. It was while they shivered together on a lonely, empty depot platform, that she proposed the bargain.

"You've muddled this whole thing, my dear," she said, affecting a vast, winning tolerance for her junior. "If you weren't such a hot-headed, foolish child, you'd understand. I never had the slightest intention of deserting Sam in his trouble."

Roxy's eyes flashed scorn.

"I can get Sam pardoned in a minute." Virginia smiled. "The governor will do exactly what my father asks him to. As a matter of fact, I meant to attend to that tomorrow, just before the wedding. Go on back to Sam, Roxy. And let me go home before I catch my death of cold. Sam Winthrop will be a free man before tomorrow night—free to marry you, Roxy. And you wouldn't have me around to spoil your plans."

"Do you think I'd trust you out of my sight?"

"Then don't," Virginia laughed. "Keep your gun and come with me. Stay right beside me until I get Sam a free pardon—"

"A pardon!" Roxy's cry was sharp. "A pardon for what? Something that he didn't do? A pardon that would leave half of Cayuse County whispering behind his back that he got off through political influence; that would ruin the rest of his life?"

"I would leave you free to marry him, my dear! Don't forget that. And I'm warning you now that if you force my hand—if you keep on with this crazy gunplay—I'll save his life all right, but I'll make him marry me. I can do it, and don't you ever forget it!"

Virginia's laugh was excited and boastful.

"You drag me back to Three Feathers, and I'll tell Sam I never dreamed he was in trouble. I'll tell him I was too busy with wedding plans to see a newspaper. I'll tell him he is the only man in the world, and I'll marry him!"

She could do it. Roxy was sure of that. She twisted men around her little finger, dangled them like puppets.

"Sam's a lot better bet than Hardy," Virginia mused aloud. "Hardy's twice my age. I ran away once from marrying him. I'd even have taken Olcott if he hadn't turned out to be a cheap blackmailer. But Sam's worth having."

Suddenly Virginia giggled. Her laugh was utterly carefree. "Let go of that gun before you get callouses on your hands, Roxy. Stop being ridiculous. I'm going with you. You can't get rid of me, even if you use a gun on me. I'm going to Three Feathers and save Sam Winthrop's life. Then I'm going to marry him. Tell him anything you like about me. You know perfectly well that he won't believe you."

There had been no opportunity for telegrams, even if one could have warned Sam's lawyer in time, but Cal's message was enough. The lawyer and Harkness, the prosecutor, were waiting when Roxy drove a hired livery rig into the town.

Virginia was out of the buggy before it stopped, running to the astonished men.

"Sam!" she lilted. "Take me to Sam. I didn't know. I never heard a word of it, with all the excitement about my wedding plans. He's not guilty. Olcott shot himself. You've got to free my darling."

With a fast racing heart, Roxy heard her dictate a sworn statement. Sam would be freed. It was merely a matter of a few formal motions in court next morning, Harkness assured them.

"And now"— Virginia's laugh tinkled with excitement—"take me to him at the jail. And let me tell him. It's my privilege. I demand it!"

They went to the sheriff's office at the jail. Apprised of the joyous news, the sheriff departed, grinning, to bring his prisoner. The bare little office was silent while they waited. Far off, they heard the muffled clang of a steel-barred door.

Virginia's laugh trailed like a triumphant wedding march as she darted into Sam's arms.

Roxy shut her eyes to close out that picture. She swayed with fatigue. No sleep for forty-eight hours, the dreadful uncertainty, the devastating rage that nerved her to kidnap Virginia—all these things clamored for payment at once.

Virginia was in Sam's arms, and he was kissing her. No use telling him the truth. He wouldn't believe it. He would marry Virginia—and she would make him wretched!

At this point Roxy ceased to be a helpless young girl. Virginia would make Sam wretched when she, Roxy Lane, could make him happy. If only he would listen! If he would just stop and look at her!

"If you want to be popular, act helpless —and a little bit of a fool, dear."

Virginia had said that. She knew how to handle men. She knew that Sam collected mavericks—every stray that he met won his love by its helplessness. Virginia had showed her how to fight for Sam.

Roxy gasped Sam's name, her voice so

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strained it frightened them all. Then she pitched to the floor at his feet, white as death, her hands fluttering in mute appeal for his help.

"Roxy!" Sam roared, releasing Virginia so hastily that she had to clutch a chair to keep her balance. "Roxy! She's fainted. She never fainted in her life. Always strong as a horse. Get Doc Wilder! Get him quick."

ROXY waked from a sleep that had been haunted by happy dreams. Sam had been hovering near her bed, with woebegone face, his big hands twisted together in apprehension.

Or maybe they weren't dreams! The memory was extraordinarily vivid.

Another man bent over her as her eyes opened.

It was Doc Wilder.

"You're in your own bed, at home," Doc said. "Sam's downstairs wearing out the parlor rug walking back and forth, waiting for news of you. Let him walk. Do him good."

"No!" Roxy gasped.

Suddenly she was ashamed of her lies. "Tell him at once. I'm not sick. I was just tired—"

"Tell him? And make a liar out of me!" Doc favored her with a shrewd wink. "I've already staked my professional reputation that you had everything except compound fractures of both legs. No patient of mine is going to lose me my professional reputation in this county. You can see Sam. But don't forget, you've been sick. You've been sick as hell!"

Sam's feet took the stairs two at a time. But as he neared her door they ceased their clamor.

He came inside on tiptoe, awed. When he saw Roxy's smile—a pallid smile, for she was still a weary girl—he sank beside her bed and took her in his arms.

"Roxy! Roxy, darling! You had me scared. But you're going to get well, aren't you?"

"Of course, Sam! Oh, Sam, I—I wasn't . . . I lied—"

Sam didn't listen. He had something more important to say. "You'll get well quick and marry me, won't you, Roxy? I love you so—"

"You can't," Roxy gasped breathlessly. "Virginia—"

"I love you," Sam repeated stubbornly. "I haven't been able to think about anything but loving you for weeks."

Roxy's eyes began to shine softly. A beautiful glow supplanted the pallor of fatigue.

"Virginia?" Sam spoke the name lightly. "She's a mighty pretty girl, Roxy. And she was absolutely wonderful, risking everything to save my life. I'll always be grateful to her. Maybe I sort of lost my head over her the first few days she was here. Do you know how I found out at last that I wasn't really in love with her?"

Roxy shook her head vigorously to the question.

"One night," Sam went on, "Virginia kind of showed that she was fond of me. When I put my arms around her, she—I—well, anyway, we kissed each other. And I held her in my arms—"

"Yes, Sam. Go on. . . ." Roxy whispered faintly.

"That was when I knew for dead sure, Roxy. I knew that I was holding the wrong woman in my arms. I knew it was you I wanted. And if they hadn't been going to hang me, I'd have told you about this weeks ago."

That was the truth and Roxy knew it. Sam wanted her, not because she was a pitiful little stray, but because she was the only woman in the world who had won his heart.

She lifted her eyes, meeting his anxious smile—and she snuggled closer to give him her lips. ♥ ♥ ♥

(Continued from page 73)

shaking hands. She threw herself astride the rearing horse, wheeled and bolted off through the deepening darkness—toward Ghost Gulch, to warn Tom Morgan.

"Please, God," she prayed, "let me be in time. . . ."

Never had she ridden so hard, and never had she seemed to travel so slowly. Hours seemed to pass, though actually it was less than twenty minutes, before she entered Ghost Gulch.

Ghost Gulch was so called because it was said the tortured spirits of two rival outlaws, dying in a bitter quarrel long ago, still haunted this lonely, spectral place. Two outlaws meeting here, the same as Tom Morgan and his partner.

Finally she saw the light, glimmering ahead through the murky darkness. That would be a lamp in the old prospector's cabin, and meant that someone was there. If only it were Tom Morgan. . . .

Riding a little closer, she dismounted. She left her horse and walked to the cabin. She heard no sound. An instant she hesitated, then recklessly pushed open the door, stepped in quickly.

A lamp burned smokily on an upturned keg. It made a yellow pool of light against darkly surrounding shadows. And through those shadows she saw a blurred shape rising swiftly, and saw the gleam of a gun.

"Tom!" she cried. "Don't! Wait—"

And then she knew it wasn't Tom. It was a man she had never seen before. He was tall, gaunt. His bony face seemed to hold a saffron glow in the lamplight, his eyes glittering like black holes. His voice was an angry bark. "Who're you? What do you want here?"

She told herself this must be Tom's partner, that Tom had not yet arrived. "I must see Tom Morgan!" she exclaimed. "I knew he was coming here to meet you!"

For an instant the man's questioning stare seemed to probe her like a sharp knife.

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Then he asked, "How'd you know Morgan was meeting me here?"

"I found a note he dropped," she tried to explain. "The one you sent him, telling him to meet you here to—to divide the gold."

FOR another instant the man was silent, watching her so intently that he seemed actually to be reading her thoughts. But finally a wolfish grin, satisfied, stretched his thin lips.

"Well, all right," he decided. "Sit in that chair beside the lamp. You can wait there for Morgan."

There was something here she couldn't understand, something sinister, venomous.

"No!" she whispered. "I—I'll wait outside."

The man's gun lifted swiftly. "You do as I say!" he snapped. "Sit in that chair. If you don't, miss, I'll kill you."

And she knew suddenly that he would, that he meant exactly what he said. She found herself moving forward, almost like a person hypnotized, sitting rigidly on the edge of that rickety chair.

Instantly the gaunt outlaw retreated into the dark second room of the cabin. The outside door still stood open. Sally realized that she alone was visible now, that, concealed behind her, this man could swiftly murder anyone who unsuspectingly entered. Was that why he had forced her to sit here, like bait staked out, simply to lure in the doomed game?

Abruptly she was remembering the ghastly legend of this canyon, and the outlaws who had murdered each other in their savage quarrel over spoils. And tonight that grim history would repeat itself! This outlaw had been waiting to kill Tom Morgan, never intending to divide the stolen gold! Knowing Tom would be warned if he let her wait outside, he was using her simply as a lure to bring him in!

Time seemed to stand still. She didn't know whether she had been sitting here an hour or only a minute. But suddenly she heard a faint sound outside. The outlaw heard it, too, for his whisper stung her warningly, like a venomous hiss. "Don't move now! Keep still!"

She saw a vague movement in the darkness outside the door.

She screamed, "Tom! *Stay back!* You'll be killed!"

She heard his startled exclamation. At the same instant she leaped from the chair. She knew the outlaw was plunging after her, felt his arm coil suddenly around her waist, jerking her against him as a shield, hauling her back.

Then Tom Morgan's tall body filled the doorway, his face dark with amazed anger. Half-crouched, he held a leveling gun. But he couldn't shoot the outlaw without first hitting her. She felt her captor's six-shooter thrusting past her, toward Tom. Just as it thundered she wrenched desperately against it, knocked it aside.

Then Tom Morgan leaped. As he hurled himself straight at them, she saw his gun lift, lash down, heard its barrel strike slantingly the outlaw's head. She was free now, reeling sideways. The outlaw had crossed the room in a staggering rush, was whirling, his gun blasting. Like a jet of fire that bullet scraped the top of her head. The room seemed suddenly to revolve. She felt the floor slap against her back.

Above her Tom's gun thundered bitterly. She saw the outlaw plunge downward; yet even as he died his gun made one final crash. And with horrible clarity she saw that last bullet strike Tom Morgan. She saw the tiny spurt of dust from his vest directly over his heart. Even as he fell she knew that no man could be hit in that spot and still live.

Her mind went blank.

THAT skimming bullet had only tapped her unconscious. But when she opened her eyes again she found herself in bed, at the ranch of the Widow Jones. That gray-

haired woman refused to let her talk, insisted that she rest, saying only that she had been brought by Sheriff Lem.

By late morning, however, even her headache was gone. But not her heartache. She kept remembering how Tom Morgan had fallen, dust spurting from his vest where that bullet struck him over the heart.

She heard low voices in the next room. Presently the door opened. She saw two men. One was old Sheriff Lem—the other was Tom Morgan!

She couldn't believe her eyes. She had seen that bullet strike him, seen him fall, yet here he stood, apparently unharmed.

"Now, honey," fretted the sheriff, "what you mean anyway, getting your head in front of a bullet like that? Young feller here wants to talk to you, honey. All right, Morgan. I'll be waiting outside."

She believed that Tom was Sheriff Lem's prisoner, had miraculously escaped death only to be arrested. He walked forward, stood beside the bed.

"Miss Sally," he asked, "whatever made you go to that cabin last night?"

"I found the note you dropped, from your partner," she said. "Yesterday I learned Sheriff Lem planned to trap you. I went there—to warn you."

Tom Morgan's lean face was amazed. "You wanted to warn me—even if I was a desperate criminal?"

"I didn't want to," she admitted. "I tried not to."

He reached down swiftly, took her hand. "Sally Lane," he said, "that man in the cabin last night was Lobo Garcia. Months ago he murdered my father, cold-bloodedly, for a few dollars. I've been trailing him ever since. He and an hombre named Hawks held up a stage. I caught Hawks, found that note on him from Garcia saying they would meet last night. That was the note I lost, not a note to me, but from

(Continued on page 113)

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Seems like all the world is fanning
With a jug of zither spice,
There's fiddle in tomorrow
With fog of paradise—

Not because of any season,
Not because of any view. . . .
I've a dearer-sweeter reason—
Wrangler, it's because of you.

—Gladys Martin

(Continued from page 77)

the other men of Wolf's Valley with new eyes. For never had any of them been like Rudolph Heidner as he was this minute, with the blood lust upon him, with his hand over his holstered gun, wanting to kill.

"Did you see him, Joany?" Rudolph repeated.

With no hesitation she spoke the lie. "No. I have seen nobody!"

"Well, I'm going to search around your pool anyhow," Rudolph announced.

Terror froze Joany then, blanched her face to whiteness. "You can't!" she cried out, spreading her arms across the narrow path that led between big boulders into the glade. "Nobody can go in there!"

"I'm going to search it," Rudolph insisted, and put his hands upon her shoulders to push her aside.

Fury mingled with Joany's terror then; she was ready to fight tooth and nail—but there was no need. A heavy hand clamped down on Rudolph's shoulder from behind. A bronzed face, weathered to the color of an old saddle, appeared over Rudolph's shoulder, and old Calico's dry voice spoke, "Reckon you'd better be changin' your mind, Rudolph. It's been a law since Joany was able to wash behind her own ears that nobody went near her bathin' pool there. You'll not go now."

Rudolph whirled. "Who'll stop me?" he demanded, and his hand streaked his gun.

Calico was faster. Through the heavy twilight a little orange flame streaked from Calico's hand toward Rudolph's, and the next instant the big blond man was cursing and shaking his benumbed fingers, while his gun lay upon the ground.

Calico leaned over, picked up the gun. "You can have it back up at the house," he said curtly. "And you'd best make tracks for there. Red wants to see you."

When Rudolph had gone, Calico looked down at Joany. His faded eyes were always melancholy-looking, but there was infinite

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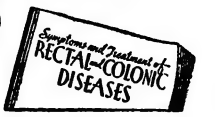

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shrewdness in their depths. Joany felt that Calico was reading her very soul, as he stood there, looking down at her.

"If you've got anything up your sleeve, young lady," he said, at last, "you'd better be careful. You ain't actin' yourself lately, anyhow. What's up?"

THROUGH childhood Joany had never been able to keep any secrets from Calico; but she wasn't a child any more. She was a woman, with the man she loved in danger. And a new fear had come upon her in this last hour; she had seen the men of Wolf's Valley with new eyes, and she couldn't be sure even of Calico. So again she lied for Steve.

"There's nothing, Calico. I just couldn't bear to have Rudolph go into my glade. It would spoil everything."

Old Calico's face softened, and he put a gaunt hand upon her head. "This ain't no life for you, Joany," he said, and worry was etched deeply in his rugged face. "And you're goin' to have to leave it one of these days. Your pa and I both know that. Maybe he'll be the one who'll have to take you, and maybe it'll be me. But I want you to remember this. Down in the old corral where we used to keep your pony, the one in the draw—"

"I remember," Joany said.

"Well, if you ever need to be leavin' Wolf's Valley in a hurry, make for that old gully. There'll always be a couple of horses there, saddled, day or night. Water in the canteen and dried jerky in the saddlebag. You'll remember that?"

"Of course!" she said, and put his hand against her cheek. Some day, soon, she was going to find courage to tell Calico about the glorious thing that had come into her life, a thing she had lost, but would always hold in memory. "Good night, Calico!"

"I'll walk up to the house with you. Go get your things!"

Back in the glade Joany could only kneel and whisper softly, as she gathered up the things she had left, "I'll be back tonight!" And then she followed Calico up to the sprawling adobe house on the hill above the valley.

At any other time, Joany would have been frightened, for things were not the same. There was tension, strain—and she couldn't see her father.

"He's asleep!" Rudolph told her.

At times, when Joany thought of Steve, down by the pool, her fear sharpened at the undercurrent of tension about her. Then thinking of him always brought another thought—and moments of stirring thrills would spring forth from her turbulence, like sharp white star-points against black clouds. It was this way, too, she remembered his gray eyes, tender, with dancing golden lights, like fire seen through clean smoke, and felt again the hard eagerness of his young body as his arms held her.

It was late when she dared steal away to Steve, with some food she knew he would need, and it seemed to her that never was Wolf's Valley as lovely as tonight. The long narrow valley, rimmed by dark hills, lay luminous under the low-hanging moon and the star-dusted purple sky. And Joany was keenly aware of the beauty of this night. She felt filled with song and moon magic as she hurried through dappled night shadows that lay, lacelike, on the rocky floor of the path on her way to Steve.

He was waiting, and his face lighted with a smile when he saw her. "Joany!" he began. "There are things I've got to say—"

"Wait," she said, "and eat first. I've brought you some food."

She sat there, watching him in the starlight, watching the dark hair that tumbled over his forehead above the gray eyes. Steve looked at her, straightened his shoulders—those broad warm shoulders where her head had rested so short a time ago. A sudden wave of tenderness made her heart throb faster.

"Oh, why does it have to be this way?"

(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 102)

she cried, flinging back her head. And her hair, that had been as new metal under the sunshine, was like old polished copper now. There was tragedy in her elfin face. Her hands moved a little toward him.

Steve's grimness melted. With a little exclamation he caught those two hands, drew them against his heart for a moment before he took her completely into his arms. "Joany! Joany!" he said huskily, before his lips found hers.

STAR-DUST and ecstasy filled the world; Steve's arms about her and Steve's lips upon hers. Joany asked no more of heaven than that. Her every sense was quiveringly alive; the glimmering mystery of the silvery shafts of moonlight; the tang of sage brought by the night breeze; the plaintive cry of a night-bird—and the stealthy slither of footsteps coming closer.

Joany's bright head jerked up, listening. There was no time for words. Whirling, she ran on silent feet up the path—and was knocked breathless when her small body collided with another at the edge of the forbidden path.

"Rudolph!" she exclaimed. Then, angrily, "You dared return here, when Calico told you today—"

"It was the one place I could see you alone," Rudolph said calmly. "And anyway—after tomorrow the place will no longer be forbidden to me."

She drew a quick breath; her eyes flew open. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"You're marrying me tomorrow!" he said, and his smile was frightening. It was so possessive, so assured.

"Marry you?" she echoed furiously. "Why, I wouldn't—"

"You're marrying me tomorrow," he repeated. "You see, it's the only way, Joany. Your father cannot live more than a few hours, and—"

"Dad!" Joany cried. "But you told me tonight he was asleep. You wouldn't let me see him. Oh!" Her hands went to her heart, and she stared through the shadows toward the house. "I've got to go to him! I—"

"Not now!" Rudolph interrupted, and reached out to catch her wrist. "I want to talk to you first. Can't you see, Joany, that you couldn't stay alone here, among all the men? And if you left here you'd simply be an outlaw's daughter—spurned by everyone. I can save you from all that, Joany—and I will!"

Before she could move, he had jerked her into his arms and held her there with terrible strength that resisted all her efforts to escape. His face bent and his lips sought hers, were reaching them, in spite of Joany's desperate struggles. And suddenly it seemed as if she would die if he kissed her. Then, to her horror, she heard her own voice screaming out the name she should not have whispered: "Steve! Steve!"

There was the crash of feet over the path. There was a quick glimpse of Steve's face, hot, white, twisted with fury. Then his fist landed again Rudolph's jaw, and the blond man crashed to the ground. He rolled over. When he came up his gun was in his hand.

It seemed to Joany that time stood still. All the silver magic drained from the night. Joany screamed, leaped forward as the gun was slowly raised and aimed at Steve—who had no gun.

She could never make it in time to throw her slender body between the two men; her feet seemed leaden. And then—Calico spoke from the shadows.

"Rudolph," he said grimly, "this time I'm not aimin' for your gunhand!"

Rudolph whirled, and the two stood there with the moment stretched out as tautly as a fine fiddle string wound to the breaking point. And like the fiddle string, Joany knew, it would break on a whining note—the whine of bullets.

It was Rudolph who shot first, but Calico leaped to the shadows of a boulder, and from there his gun spat twice toward Ru-

(Continued on page 106)

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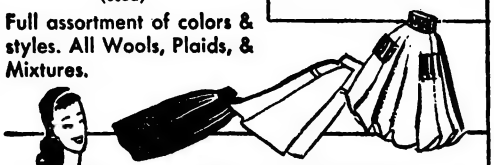

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(Continued from page 104)

dolph, who also twisted his body sidewise to reach shelter. From its safety, Rudolph fired three times in quick succession, and Joany gave a cry. That was the signal that would bring all the other outlaws, and—for she was seeing things with a clearer vision—they would be Rudolph's men!

STEVE caught Joany's arm. Swiftly he drew her back of the huge protecting rocks, around to where Calico crouched, gun in hand.

"Let me have your gun!" he whispered tensely. "I'll hold them off. You take Joany away. You've got to!"

But Joany stared down at the fresh blood on Steve's shirt. The wound she had fixed this afternoon was bleeding again.

"No, Steve!" she cried, low. "You couldn't! You're wounded—"

But Steve was reaching for Calico's gun. "Go on, man," he rasped.

A bullet hit the great rock that sheltered them, ricocheted.

"You and Joany get hell-a-tootin' for the old corral," Calico said from the corner of his mouth, as he took careful aim. "She'll know what to do, from then on. Red and me'll meet you—"

"But dad's dying! Rudolph told me!"

Another shot. "I told Red about the young squirt you was hidin' here in the glade—oh, you ain't fooled me, young lady—and he reckoned we'd all make a run for it. Your pa's hurt, but able to ride. Once the gang's after you, I'll get him out, and we'll meet beyond. Get goin' now!" Then, drawing another gun. "Here—take this!"

Steve still looked at Calico. "Sure you two can get away?" he asked.

"Hell, yes—if you get Joany out before hell pops!"

"Thanks!" Steve took the gun, caught Joany's hand, just as bedlam broke loose. Rudolph's men were coming fast. Shouts filled the air, and the sound of feet hurrying toward the glade.

Glancing back, Joany saw Calico's shadow making toward the house, keeping to the thicket. Then, with Steve, she started over the path that led to the old abandoned corral.

The horses were there, saddled and waiting. Steve held Joany in his arms a moment before he lifted her up, and his quick kiss held a promise of a lifetime of love they might never live to know.

As they circled the ranchhouse, Joany breathed a prayer. There was no time for anything else, for the outlaws must have discovered their escape. They were making for the big corral, and their shouts filled the air while Joany and Steve rode on.

At last they came to the place where they must leave the safety of the draw and go across country, under the full glow of the bright silver moon. Steve drew up, held her in the curve of his arm for a moment, before he slapped her horse ahead, in order to shield her going with his own body.

Joany got a quick glimpse of Rudolph, quirting his horse cruelly, as the animal plunged away from the saddle. Then the men caught sight of their quarry and bullets began whining through the air. The race was on.

The horses were good ones, Joany realized before they had gone far. Calico must have known that she would have desperate need of them. Joany wondered dully if he could know of the bullets that had followed her; bullets from the guns of men she had thought were her friends; men she had called good, kind. They had only been friends because Rudolph willed it so. Now, under his orders, they were hunting her.

Then the firing stopped as the others took up the chase. The trail widened, and Joany made Steve ride beside her, sensing that Rudolph didn't want her killed. For he wanted her for himself. Joany bent low over the horse's neck. The men behind were holding the pace. And there were so many of them!

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)

The moon was a cold thing now, shining relentlessly upon the valley, showing their flight clearly. Ahead of them the valley walls drew together into the pass that gave outlet to the lower range, and the trail narrowed. They would have to go single file, and the men would shoot at Steve.

She heard Steve's voice at her ear. "Joany darlin', isn't there any other trail that turns off?"

"Only one, just ahead here," she said. "A bottleneck pass, and a small canyon—a blind one. We'd be trapped!"

The trail narrowed abruptly, and Steve made her go ahead. Then the path dipped into a little swale that carried Joany out of gun range—but not Steve. Guns spoke in a flurry behind them. Steve's horse squealed, and as he came over the crest, Joany saw that the animal limped badly.

She slowed her own horse. "My horse—it'll have to carry double!" she gasped. "I won't leave you, Steve! I won't!"

Steve was silent. Then, as the trail forked off, he caught her bridle reins, turned the two horses into the side path.

"But this goes into that blind canyon!" she cried.

"It's our only chance!" he said. "We'll have to try it!"

Joany wondered, desperately, if the ruse would throw the others off, if they would ride on the regular trail. But there was no hope. The tracks must have shown plainly; for, without any hesitation, the pursuing band broke into the side trail, came in full pace after them.

There were no more bullets; they must have realized that their quarry was about bagged. There was only the relentless pound of hoofs, so very close and coming ever closer, as Steve's horse lost more and more blood from a gash across its side.

Then, for a moment, they were in shelter as they passed between the high walls of the narrow bottleneck pass, twisting in an S shape that would come out into a bowl-like canyon that lay in a straight line up to the high walls ahead.

Under the patch of faint moonlight Joany saw that Steve's horse couldn't go on. The animal pounded heavily with a slowing stride, and foam flecked his chest.

"Go on, Joany," Steve ordered. "Find what shelter you can and hide till daylight. I'll hold Rudolph and the others."

"I won't go on without you!"

For answer, he quirted her horse on, and she had gone quite a distance before she was able to bring it to a stop. Then, wheeling, she saw that Steve was out of the saddle, had his gun raised. And she heard the hoofs of the outlaws' horses at the outer end of the pass.

Steve's gun spoke, and his wounded horse fell to a merciful death across the opening of the pass.

The pounding of hoofs came louder and Steve jumped back, just as Rudolph's mount hove in sight, followed hell-bent by all the others, packed closely in the narrow bottleneck.

They came in a rush, bunched tightly together.

Joany held her breath, waiting. Rudolph's horse came upon the dead animal too quickly to stop. The mount went down, catapulting his rider over his head. Horse and rider fell directly in the path of the others.

The next rider hit the piled-up bunch and tumbled, and the others came on too fast to stop. Dust rose in a great cloud, shimmering eerily under the moonlight. Horses squealed, men shouted. The pass was a maelstrom of struggling horseflesh and yelling, cursing men.

Joany missed Steve then. Riding recklessly closer, she saw that he was standing over Rudolph, had taken his guns. "Now, tell the others to drop their guns!" Steve ordered. "And the first one of them who makes a move—brings a bullet to you!"

It was over in a few minutes. The three men who were not hurt by the plunging horses in the pass, were glad to give up.

The fight meant nothing to them, now that Rudolph was not worth fighting for.

DAWN was breaking vividly as they rode slowly back to the ranchhouse, the disarmed prisoners, Rudolph—tied to the saddle—and Steve and Joany, riding stirrup to stirrup in the rear.

As they neared the ranchhouse, two men rode toward them; Old Calico, and another man who swayed a little in the saddle, but who smiled at Joany under his thatch of reddish hair.

"Dad!" she cried. "Dad!" and then she was beside him, her arms about his neck.

He smiled again. "Calico and I sort of reckon on ridin' out with you two, and stayin' for the weddin'," he said. "Then we're makin' for Texas way, where I've been buildin' up a spread, out of my own money, against the day I'd want to go to it. We'll be needin' a man like Steve to help us, Calico and me, if you'd care to ride down there, once the honeymoon is over!"

"We'll be there!" Steve grinned.

"But Dad!" Joany cried. "The law—it'll be hunting you!"

"I'll take care of that, after the weddin'," he said gently. "I can give back every dollar I ever took, and I never killed a man. Ever since Rudolph came into Wolf's Valley and took over, Calico and me have been workin' our own cattle, savin' so we could pay up and move out. And now the time is here." Then, sternly, "Ride ahead, you men! Calico and I'll take you down!"

Joany and Steve followed slowly through a dawn that made her bright hair a flow of new gold, and brought out the tender golden lights in Steve's smoke-gray eyes.

There wasn't any need of many words between them. It was all said in the clasp of Steve's arm about her. As their horses slowed, drew to a stop, words were forgotten in the fire of his kisses burning warmly upon her lips. ♥ ♥ ♥

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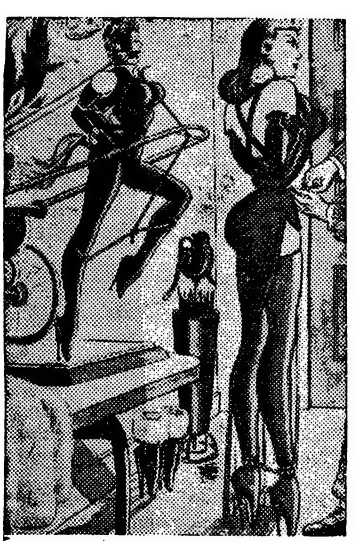

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(Continued from page 10)

Beverly of Vermont

Dear Editor:

I am a girl 22 years of age. I've read *15 Range Romances* for quite a while, and if you would print my name and address in Carryin' The Mail I would surely appreciate it.

I have dark brown hair, blue eyes, 5 ft. 5 in. tall, and am single. Sure would love to hear from both boys and girls—no age limit. Like dancing, sports, as well as music and hiking.

MISS BEVERLY ROCKWELL
Box 231
North Bennington, Vt.

Country Gal from Kentucky

Dear Editor:

How about letting a country girl from Kentucky get in her plea for pen pals?

I'm 16 years old and a junior in high school. I guess I'm about 5 ft. 5 in., and weigh 130 lbs.

I would like especially to hear from someone in the West, but would be very eager to answer all letters. I like sports, although I'm not very good at them. The only horse we have on the farm is a year older than I but just the same I love horses. I like to draw, write letters, listen to hillbilly music and enjoy being in plays and skits.

Won't you boys and girls get busy and fill my mailbox brimming full?

MARCELLA TERRELL
R. R. 1
Bloomfield, Kentucky

Alaskan Airman

Dear Editor:

I read your book *15 Range Romances* for the first time and like it very well. I'm a young airman stationed at Ladd, Alaska, and am very lonesome for mail, which I get very little. I'm 19 years old, brown hair, blue eyes, 5 ft. 11 in. tall. I would love to receive mail from girls between the ages of 15 to 20, but will answer all mail I receive.

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Mary Ann of S. C.

Dear Editor:

I'm a girl 14 years of age—will be 15 in March. I'm 5 ft. tall, and have red hair and blue eyes. I would like to hear from someone, anyone from 13 to 19. I promise to answer all.

MARY ANN PHILLIPS
403 Gibson St.
Marion, S. C.

Evelyn of N. Y.

Dear Editor:

Just a few lines to let you know I enjoy your *15 Range Romances* very much. I would like to be included in your group of pen pals.

I'm 16 years old, 5 ft. 3½ inches tall and weigh 113 lbs. I have long black hair and very dark brown eyes. I like Western music and I love to square dance. My favorite sports are basketball, hockey and boxing.

I would like to hear from everyone, especially boys in the service.

I will answer all letters promptly and I'm willing to exchange snapshots.

EVELYN LARABEE
39 Larnard St.
Potsdam, New York

Marilee of Illinois

Dear Editor:

I would like very much to have my letter published in your column for pen pals. I'm 15 years old, have dark, chocolate brown hair, gray eyes and stand 5 ft. 4 in. tall. I have many hobbies, activities, and interests in the way of art, journalism and literature. Would enjoy writing to girls and boys anywhere and everywhere. Will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

MARILEE HOLLIS
Riverview Hotel
Golconda, Ill.

Jean of Texas

Dear Editor:

Please move over and give a small space for a lonesome *15 Range Romances* reader. I'd like to hear from everyone between the ages of 35 and 45.

I like all sports, but horseback riding is my favorite.

I'm widowed, age 35, 5 ft. 3 in. tall, with long brown curly hair, blue eyes and weigh 128 lbs. Will exchange photos, and promise to answer all letters.

JEAN RICHARDSON
Hondley Station No. 12
Fort Worth, Texas

Likes Horses

Dear Editor:

I hail from Montana and live on a farm about 5 miles from town. Enjoy riding horseback, and have a horse of my own. I don't care who writes just as long as someone does.

I will try to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots.

I'm 14 years old, 5 ft. 4 in. tall, have brown hair and grey eyes. I am also a freshman in high school.

GERRY DALE
Route 2
Kalispell, Montana

Bettie of Florida

Dear Editor:

What are the chances of a married gal getting on the Carryin' the Mail list? I'm a regular reader of *15 Range Romances* and enjoy it very much.

I'm 29 years old, 5 ft. 2 in. tall, weigh 130 lbs., with brown eyes and dark auburn hair and fair complexion.

No age limit—will correspond with anyone

from 1 to 100, near or far. Will exchange photos and view cards. Like most sports.

MRS. BETTIE HAMLIN
411-E Hickory St.
Arcadia, Fla.

Marion of Conn.

Dear Editor:

I am a constant read of *15 Range Romances* and think it is tops. I am a widow, 32 years old, 5 ft. 1 in. tall, light brown hair and gray-green eyes. My hobbies are collecting snapshots and souvenirs. So, how about someone writing a lonesome widow? Will answer all letters received.

MRS. MARION DENNIS
12 Railroad Ave.
Danbury, Conn.

Missouri Couple

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely girls who would like to receive letters from everyone, no matter what age or nationality. We hope that you will print our plea, since it is our first try.

Joyce is 17 years old, with light brown hair and green eyes. She is 5 ft. 7 in. tall and weighs 125 lbs.

Shirley is 17 years old, has brown hair and brown eyes. She is 5 ft. 4 in. tall and weighs 115 lbs.

We like all kinds of sports, movies, dancing, music, and reading. Our favorite past time is writing letters and making friends all over the world.

We will exchange snapshots with everyone who writes. So come on, everyone, and fill our mail boxes.

JOYCE MALLORY
Route 3
SHIRLEY LIPPSTOCK
Route 1
Madison, Missouri

Delores of Texas

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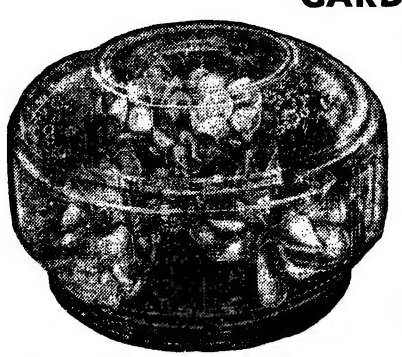

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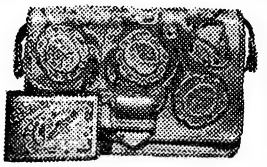

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join your club? I'm 14 years of age, with blond hair and blue eyes. Sophomore in high school. Stand 5 ft. 3½ in. tall, and weigh 120 lbs.

I am interested in all sports, mostly basketball and baseball. I like hillbilly music. My hobby is writing letters. Would like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 22

DELORES TATOM
Route 1, Box 117
Pineland, Texas

Irene of Ohio

Dear Editor:

I don't know how many times I've tried getting my letter published in Carryin' the Mail, but here's hoping I make it this time.

I'm 24 years old, have light brown hair, blue eyes and am 5 ft. 6 in. tall and weigh about 120 lbs. I enjoy reading *15 Range Romances* very much.

My hobbies are reading and writing short stories, especially Western stories. I would like to write to someone who is also interested in writing short stories.

I also like to take walks in the summer, like the movies, and I like Western and hillbilly music, waltz and polka music.

MISS IRENE MIZER
233 Osborn Street
Rossford, Ohio

Alabama Miss

Dear Editor:

How about letting a lonesome girl from good old Alabama slip into the crowd around the mailbag?

I have black hair, green eyes, I'm 5 ft. 3 in., and weigh 110 lbs.

My hobbies are singing, going to movies, riding horseback and collecting pictures of friends from other states. So, come on, fellows and girls of any age, and write to me. I'll answer every letter.

LOUISE BOBS
Route 1
Coker, Alabama

Canadian Neighbor

Dear Editor:

Please let a lonely divorcee and mother of three young children get in on the crowd of *Carryin' The Mail*. This is my first plea to you. Help me out.

I am 23, 5 ft. 3 in., medium weight and fair complexion. Hair is dark brown. My children range in age from 5 years to 3 years, and although my hands are quite busy, I'll always find time to write to fellows and girls alike of all ages.

My hobbies are collecting salt-pepper shakers, drinking glasses (all shapes and sizes) hankies and post-cards. Will answer all letters.

MARCELLA DUQUETTE
c/o General Delivery
Crystal Beach, Ont.,
Canada

(Continued from page 99)

Garcia to Hawks. I told Sheriff Mullins about it, and we planned to catch Garcia as he waited for Hawks. Then Garcia learned from you I was coming, knew I was after him, made his play to murder me. And he would have, except for you."

She was staring at him blankly.

"Miss Sally," he said, "I told you I had had a busines to do, which was catching Garcia. But I told you, too, that I aimed to see you again. Because I knew, almost the first minute I saw you, that you were the one woman I wanted for my wife."

She wondered why her eyes should be misted with tears when suddenly she was so wildly happy.

He said, "I got quite a ranch down South, Miss Sally. After you know me better, do you think maybe I'd stand a chance with you?"

"I don't need to know you better," Sally murmured. She knew her cheeks were flushing. "Didn't I give you that little rain god? Well, it isn't just a lucky piece. It's supposed to be—a love charm. My mother gave it to father, before they were married —and the very next night he proposed."

Tom Morgan's face was oddly startled. "Last night," he said, "Lobo Garcia's bullet hit me over the heart, but only knocked me down. That was because I had that little rain god in my vest pocket. Garcia's bullet was stopped by it."

She saw him bending toward her. She felt his arms go around her. This man fitted the mold her heart had already shaped, and the dream changed now into shining reality.

"But it wasn't," he added,"just a bit of clay that stopped that bullet."

She knew what he meant. That he would never have been carrying the tiny rain god, been saved by it, if she hadn't given it to him, *wanted* to give it to him. That it had been really this which had finally shielded him—a woman's love. ♥ ♥ ♥

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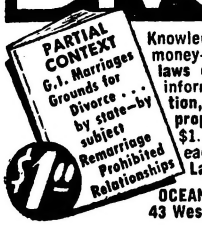

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—Continued from back cover

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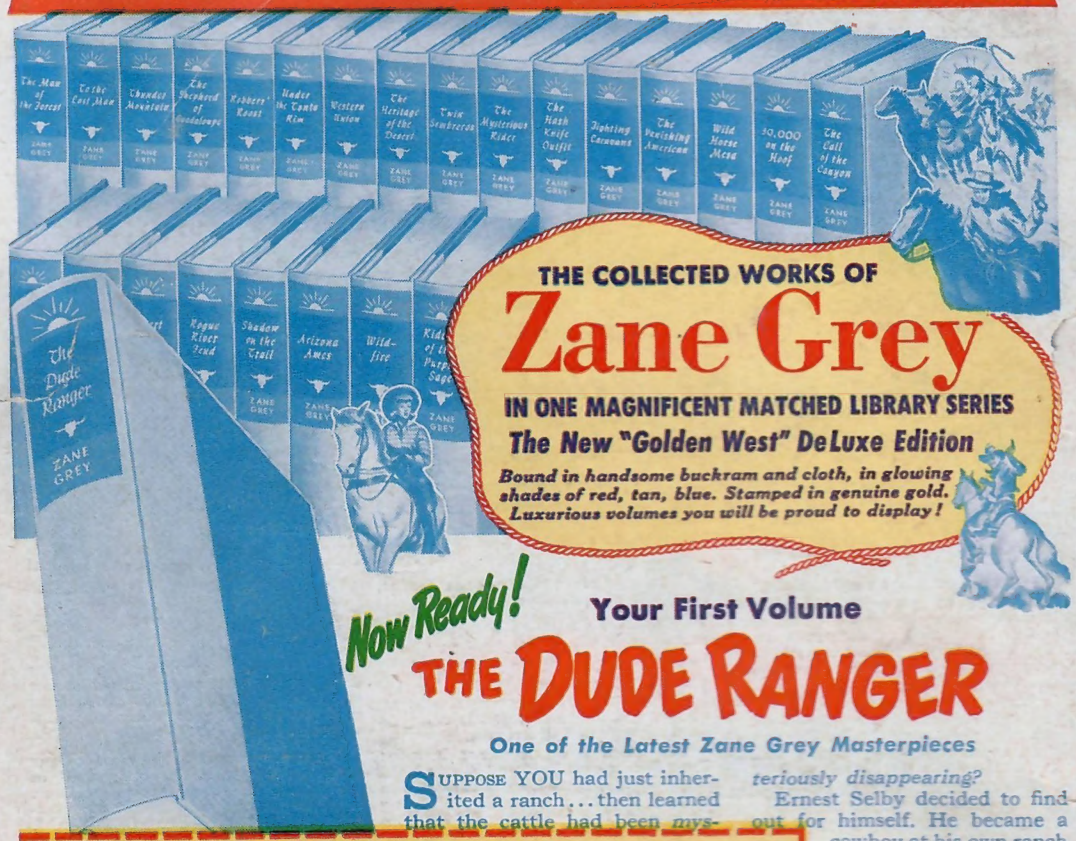

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